

Conceptualizing Outness about Sexual Orientation:

Implications for Research and Practice

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Abstract

“Outness” about sexual orientation is colloquially understood to refer to the extent to which others know about one’s sexual orientation. However, conceptualizations of outness vary widely in research (Orne, 2011). Existing measures of outness, including the Outness Inventory (OI; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) and the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), may have limitations that affect their utility. The purpose of the present study was to investigate how participants conceptualized outness about sexual orientation and whether they believed it can be measured and to explore how well the OI and the NOS aligned with those conceptualizations.

Participants were 170 women and men recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Nonheterosexual participants were oversampled; 122 participants identified as nonheterosexual, and 48 identified as heterosexual. I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes in the qualitative data. I identified several different ways in which different participants conceptualized outness, as well as identified several concerns about the OI and the NOS. I investigated patterns in the relationships among participants’ self-estimated outness scores, OI scores, and NOS scores. I also investigated heterosexual participants’ responses to the same survey.

Nonheterosexual participants described varying conceptualizations of outness. Most mentioned making decisions about disclosing or concealing their sexual orientation and assessing their own outness based on who in particular knew about their sexual orientation. Nonheterosexual participants also mentioned several concerns about the OI and the NOS, including that the scales overemphasized talking about sexual orientation and that the scales either included irrelevant social groups or did not include relevant social groups. Heterosexual

participants mentioned many of the same themes that nonheterosexual participants did; however, many also stated or implied that outness is not relevant to heterosexual individuals because their sexual orientation is almost always correctly assumed.

Researchers have investigated relationships between outness and numerous other variables (e.g., physical health variables, relationship satisfaction, internalized homonegativity). However, different people conceptualize outness differently, and some conceptualize outness as nonlinear or as fluid. Simply quantifying outness may not be sufficient for describing the experiences of nonheterosexual individuals.

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Conceptualizing Outness About Sexual Orientation: Implications for Research and Practice

Given the recent legalization of same-sex marriage, it may seem reasonable to believe that general attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals are becoming more positive and inclusive. Although that may be true in some contexts, anti-gay bias and equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals are ongoing social and political issues (Becker, 2014; Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Murphy, 2015; Tulloch et al., 2015). These issues, and the potentials for discrimination and even violence that accompany them (Ehrlich, 1990; Meyer, 2012; O’Cleirigh, Dale, Elsesser, Pantalone, & Mayer, 2015), make it important for LGBTQ individuals to consider the contexts in which others know about their sexual orientation or gender presentation statuses. The widely used term for this concept is “outness” about sexual orientation or gender presentation, although conceptualizations of outness vary widely in the literature (Orne, 2011; see Cass, 1979 for an early example). In this paper, I will focus on outness about sexual orientation rather than about gender presentation because each of these types of identities presents some different issues when conceptualizing outness.

Numerous researchers have conducted studies with the intent of identifying relationships between outness—as they conceptualized it—and health-related variables. Examples of health-related variables include psychopathology symptoms (e.g., Aranda et al., 2015), physical health variables such as health care use (e.g., Steele, Tinmouth, & Lu, 2006) and safe sex practices (e.g., White & Stephenson, 2014), and relationship variables such as relationship satisfaction (e.g., Knoble & Linville, 2012) and intimate partner violence (e.g., Kelley et al., 2014). Studies like these are important for working toward a greater understanding of how factors related to differences in sexual orientation might be important for individuals with varying identities. However, findings from studies like these vary widely, and there are several conceptual issues

with defining and measuring outness that make these findings difficult to interpret. The focus of the present study is to address some of these conceptual issues by investigating participants' experiences with conceptualizing their own outness and with responding to two preexisting outness measures designed by researchers.

I will begin this paper by briefly outlining some issues with the ways in which outness about sexual orientation has been operationalized. Next, I will summarize existing research on the relationships between outness and various health-related variables. I will then describe the variety of outness measures that exist in the literature and how they are used across studies. Then, I will identify potential problems with the ways in which these measures have been used to investigate relationships between outness and health-related variables. I will then discuss conceptual issues in operationalizing outness in more detail. Then, I will describe the current study and present my research questions.

Issues Related to Operationalizing Outness in Research

Before describing research that has focused on identifying relationships between outness about sexual orientation and other variables, it is important to note that outness is a complex concept that has undergone numerous revisions and iterations with regard to how researchers conceptualize it (Cass, 1979; Rust, 1993; Troiden, 1989; see Orne, 2011, for a review). Further, different researchers often use different, and sometimes conflicting, conceptualizations of outness (Orne, 2011). As with any concept in research, researchers' conceptualizations of outness influence the studies they conduct. For example, many researchers, as I will describe further in the next section, have conceptualized outness as a causal variable, leading to "outcomes" such as better or worse mental or physical health (e.g., Knoble & Linville, 2012; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Masters, Beadnell, Morrison, Hoppe, & Wells, 2013). This

conceptualization might lead researchers not to investigate or consider other possible contributing variables in their studies. Another possible conceptualization is that both outness and those positive or negative “outcomes” could be a product of the environment to which an individual is exposed (e.g., Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). For instance, a positive social environment could contribute to increased willingness to come out and to better mental health, whereas a negative social environment could contribute to decreased willingness to come out and to worse mental health. Researchers who use this conceptualization of outness would be likely to collect information about their participants’ social environments but may not include still other possible contributing variables.

As I have demonstrated above, researchers have operationalized outness differently across studies. Different operational definitions of outness are predicated upon varying implicit assumptions and have substantial implications for the ways in which findings are reported and interpreted, which I will discuss in a future section. This issue also makes it difficult to compare studies that appear to include similar research questions about possible relationships between outness and other factors. In this paper, I will not advocate for any “true” operational definition of outness. Instead, I will outline existing operational definitions of outness and their underlying assumptions, as well as the limitations these definitions introduce to the question of how outness might relate to health variables. I will assume that each study I review was designed and conducted based upon its authors’ conceptualization of outness, which may not be directly comparable to others’ conceptualizations of the construct.

Relationships Between Outness and Health-Related Variables

Numerous studies have been conducted with the goal of answering some form of the question, “Is coming out healthier than staying closeted?” One popular perspective is that, by

being out, LGBTQ individuals can express their “true selves” and demonstrate honesty and empowerment, which should result in reduced stress, anxiety, depression, and other related symptoms that “hiding” one’s true self can perpetuate (LaSala, 2000; Orne, 2011; Rasmussen, 2004). In contrast, the concept of “minority stress” (Meyer, 1995, 2003) presents a different perspective, suggesting that individuals with an identity inconsistent with the majority experience stress as a result of feeling pressure to “fit in” with both the majority population and the minority population to which they belong. According to Meyer (1995), individuals who are not out may experience minority stress due to internalized homophobia or expectations of stigma, and individuals who are out may experience additional stress due to actual experiences of discrimination. If this is the case, greater outness in LGBTQ individuals could contribute to this pressure to navigate two different, and sometimes opposing, worlds. Studies designed to explore these phenomena have focused on variables such as mental health/psychopathology, physical health/safe sex practices, and relationship quality/relationship satisfaction, with extremely mixed results. Although the uncertainty about possible links between outness and health variables may be due in part to methodological or conceptual issues with regard to operationalizing and measuring outness, I will discuss those issues in a later section. In this section, I will summarize results of studies investigating possible relationships between outness and health variables without addressing how the researchers conceptualized or measured outness.

Research on mental health variables in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations has shown that LGB individuals seem to be at greater risk for psychopathology than are heterosexual individuals (for reviews, see Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; King et al., 2008). Cochran et al. (2003) found that gay and bisexual men were more likely to experience depression, panic attacks, and general psychological distress than were heterosexual men, and lesbian and bisexual

women were more likely to experience generalized anxiety disorder than were heterosexual women. Across men and women in the study, those who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual reported greater mental health services use. In their meta-analysis of 28 studies spanning from 1966 to 2005, King et al. (2008) found that LGB individuals attempted suicide at a rate two times higher than did heterosexual individuals, and experienced depression, anxiety, and substance dependence at a rate 1.5 times higher than did heterosexual individuals.

Whether there is a relationship between outness and risk for psychopathology for LGB individuals is less well established. In some studies, greater outness has been associated with better mental health or less psychological distress measured broadly (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Lewis, Millettich, Mason, & Derlega, 2014; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). More outness has also been linked to decreased depressive symptoms (Dyar et al., 2014; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015), less suicidal ideation and self-harm (Michaels, Parent, & Torrey, 2015), decreased anxiety (Boehmer et al., 2013; Pachankis & Bernstein, 2012), and greater use of mental health services (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994). On the other hand, some studies have found an association between increased outness and poorer mental health. Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Shiu, Goldsen, and Emler (2015) found a negative correlation between sexual identity disclosure and mental health-related quality of life in their sample of LGBT older adults. Huebner and Davis (2005) found that gay men who were more out at work experienced higher levels of stress and negative affect during work hours. Walls, Laser, Nickels, and Wisneski (2010) investigated self-harm and suicidality among sexual minority youths, finding a positive correlation between outness and cutting behavior. Still other studies found no significant relationships between outness and various mental health variables (Dunn, Gonzalez, Costa, Nardi, & Iantaffi, 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Irwin, Coleman, Fisher, &

Marasco, 2014; Molina, Marquez, Logan, Leeson, Balsam, & Kaysen, 2015; Oetjen & Rothblum, 2008; Sandil, Robinson, Brewster, Wong, & Geiger, 2015).

Of course, establishing a connection between outness and mental health may not be straightforward, and a number of studies have acknowledged this in their designs and their results. Some studies have conceptualized psychological well-being and psychological distress as two separate continua rather than as opposite ends of the same continuum. Brewster, Moradi, DeBlaere, and Velez (2013) measured psychological well-being and psychological distress as separate constructs, finding that increased outness was associated with greater psychological well-being and discovering no relationship between outness and psychological distress. Other studies have postulated that it might be useful to consider outness as consisting of multiple elements rather than as a single construct. Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downing Jr., and Parsons (2013) differentiated between disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation. They found that more concealment of sexual orientation was associated with worse mental health and that there was no relationship between disclosure of sexual orientation and mental health.

Findings like the above indicate that there may be differential relationships between outness and mental health variables depending on numerous possible factors, and, indeed, a number of studies have reflected this. Aranda and colleagues (2015) found that disclosure of sexual orientation to nonfamily members was associated with more depressive symptoms for white and African American lesbians, whereas disclosure to nonfamily members was associated with fewer depressive symptoms for Latina lesbians. Feldman and Wright (2013) reported that outness was associated with both positive and negative mental health variables. They posited that this difference was a result of sexual identity strength, such that individuals with stronger, more positive sexual identities benefitted from increased outness, whereas individuals with less

positive sexual identities suffered from increased outness. Social context has also been suggested to play a role in the differential relationships between outness and mental health, with some studies showing that more accepting social environments and reactions to disclosure are associated with better mental health, whereas negative social environments and reactions to disclosure are associated with worse mental health (Legate et al., 2012; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009).

This lack of consensus about possible relationships between outness and positive or negative mental health factors extends to other variables as well. Some studies have found a positive correlation between outness and physical health. For example, greater concealment of sexual orientation has been linked to higher incidence of cancer and infectious diseases (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996) and lower CD4 cell count in HIV-positive gay men (Ullrich, Lutgendorf, & Stapleton, 2003). Greater disclosure of sexual orientation has been linked to increased cardiovascular recovery (Pérez-Benítez et al., 2007), better safe sex practices (Masters et al., 2013; White & Stephenson, 2014), and more regular health care use (Steele et al., 2006). In contrast, a few studies have linked increased outness with poorer sexual health in particular. Frost, Parsons, and Nanín (2007) found a negative association between concealment of sexual orientation and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Thoma and Huebner (2014) reported a positive link between outness and frequency of unprotected anal intercourse. McGarrity and Huebner (2014) found a differential effect of outness on physical health based on socioeconomic status (SES), wherein greater outness was associated with better physical health in high-SES men and with poorer physical health for low-SES men. Some studies noted no significant relationship between outness and physical health variables (Boehmer et al., 2013; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013).

Findings are similarly mixed for relationship-related variables, such as relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, and intimate partner violence (IPV). Many studies either have found that increased outness is related to greater relationship satisfaction (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Tornello, Johnson, & O'Connor, 2013) or have found no relationship between the two (Ackbar & Senn, 2010; Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Beals & Peplau, 2001; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). Some studies on the relationship between outness and IPV and related variables have found a positive correlation (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead, & Viggiano, 2011), some have found a negative correlation (Edwards & Sylaska, 2013; Kelley et al., 2014; St. Pierre & Senn, 2010), and some have found no relationship (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005).

In studies investigating relationships between outness and health-related variables, it is often assumed that more or less outness leads to changes in those variables. However, all of the above studies are correlational; individuals cannot be randomly assigned to be more or less out. It is impossible to say whether an individual's outness level caused them to be more or less depressed, for example, or whether that individual's depression level contributed to their decisions about being more or less out. A third possibility is that the individual's environment contributed to both their depression level and their decisions about being more or less out. This issue further adds to the difficulty in interpreting studies investigating the relationship between outness and health-related variables.

In summary, anyone interested in locating empirical evidence to support any hypothesis regarding the relationship between outness and any of these variables would have little difficulty. This presents a problem for those who wish to compile and integrate research findings

meaningfully. The wide range of methods for measuring outness may be a major contributor to the lack of consensus regarding health-related correlates of outness.

Existing Outness Measures

Researchers have measured outness in a variety of ways in the studies described above and other similar studies. The diversity of measures found in the literature may partially explain why studies investigating relationships among outness and health-related variables have demonstrated such mixed results.

Early Measures of Outness

Several researchers have developed scales to operationalize and measure outness with the idea that other researchers might use them in the future. One of the earliest of these scales was created by University of Kansas affiliates and may have been based upon data collected in Lawrence, KS. Miranda and Storms (1989) developed the Sexual Orientation Disclosure Scale (SODS) as part of a study investigating the relationship between lesbian/gay identity and psychological adjustment. The questionnaire presents respondents with 15 life areas, such as family, employment, education, and religion, and respondents were asked to rate how “out” they are in each of these categories. Participants are to respond on a scale from 1 = *not out* to 7 = *completely out* (Miranda & Storms, 1989; p. 44). Overall disclosure is calculated by averaging responses for all areas applicable to the respondent’s life, with higher scores indicating greater self-disclosure of sexual orientation. The authors examined the psychometric properties of the scale, calculating a Cronbach’s alpha of .92 ($p < .001$) for internal consistency, and determining that 7 of the 15 items met criteria for Guttman scaling. In other words, when these seven items were presented in order from those to whom participants most frequently disclosed to those to whom participants least frequently disclosed (new friends, gay people, friends from the past,

siblings, mother, father, and bosses, p. 44), the authors could reliably predict that participants who endorsed disclosure for any of the items also endorsed disclosure for all of the previous items.

The Outness Inventory (OI)

The most widely used outness scale in my review of the literature was Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) Outness Inventory (OI). This scale consists of 11 items, which the authors organized into three subscales using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The three subscales are Out to World, Out to Family, and Out to Religion. The Out to World subscale ($\alpha = .79$) measures the extent to which an individual's sexual orientation is "known by and openly discussed with" (p. 82) new straight friends, work peers, work supervisors, and strangers. The Out to Family ($\alpha = .74$) subscale measures the extent to which an individual's sexual orientation is known by and openly discussed with his or her mother, father, siblings, and extended family members. The Out to Religion ($\alpha = .97$) subscale measures the extent to which an individual's sexual orientation is known by and openly discussed with members and leaders of his or her religious community. In developing the Out to Religion subscale, the authors used only the data from the subset of participants who responded to those items, acknowledging that this area may not be relevant to everyone.

Individuals completing the measure are asked to rate each item on a 7-point scale. This rating system assesses both the likelihood that the individual or group in question knows about the participant's sexual orientation and how frequently or openly it is talked about (e.g., 2 = *person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about*; 7 = *person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about*). The authors

expressed their belief that assessing both of these aspects of outness results in a more sensitive measure, although they did not provide data to support this claim.

The Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS)

Recently, Meidlinger and Hope (2014) proposed that an important distinction when conceptualizing and measuring outness is that between disclosure of and concealment of sexual orientation. The authors speculated that individuals with sexual orientation minority identities who exhibit more concealment about their identities might be more susceptible to minority stress than are those who do not conceal their identities. They created the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS) to take this distinction into account. This scale consists of 10 items, which are grouped into two subscales: Disclosure (NOS-D) and Concealment (NOS-C). The Disclosure subscale asks respondents to estimate what percentage of the people in various groups (e.g., immediate family, extended family, people the respondent socializes with, people at the respondent's work/school, strangers) are aware of the respondent's sexual orientation identity. The Concealment subscale asks respondents to rate how often they avoid talking about subjects related to their sexual orientation or otherwise indicating their sexual orientation when interacting with members of those same groups. The authors found that disclosure and concealment showed differential utility in predicting other variables, such as social support, quality of life, and expectations of social rejection and negative evaluation due to sexual orientation; however, this scale has not been widely used, perhaps because it is relatively new.

Other Ways of Measuring Outness

Many authors have developed ways of measuring outness for the purposes of their own research without necessarily intending that others might use their measures. The following examples represent some of the more common techniques. Aranda et al. (2015) asked

participants in their study about the age of their first disclosure of their sexual orientation, as well as about whether they had disclosed to their parents, siblings, and nonfamily members.

Disclosure to family members was scored as binary (i.e., *yes/no*), and disclosure to nonfamily members was scored on a 10-point scale (0 = *out to none*; 9 = *out to all*). Waldo (1999) used a similar model, using a dichotomous question for family members and a 10-point scale for other social groups. Several studies used scales similar to the latter to measure outness to various groups or individuals, with the main differences being the number of individuals or social groups asked about and the types of scale anchors used. Some scales provided anchors that allowed the participant to indicate *how many* or *what percentage* of the individuals in a particular social group knew about their sexual orientations (e.g., 1 = *no one knows* and 5 = *all know*; Bartholomew et al., 2008, p. 350; Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Dunn et al., 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Others provided anchors that allowed participants to indicate the *likelihood* that the individual or group knew about their sexual orientations (e.g., 1 = *does not know or suspect* and 4 = *definitely knows and we have talked about it*; Beals & Peplau, 2001, p. 14).

Parks and Hughes (2007) based disclosure of sexual orientation on the total number of social groups to which participants had disclosed their sexual orientation. Other studies asked participants to estimate their overall outness rather than their outness to various groups (McGarritty & Huebner, 2014; Ullrich et al., 2003). Still other studies asked participants to describe how closeted they are compared to other LGB men and women (e.g., *definitely in the closet*, *in the closet most of the time*, *half in and half out*, *out of the closet most of the time*, and *completely out of the closet*; Cole et al., 1996; p. 245; Martin & Dean, 1990). Some studies simply asked participants to characterize themselves as either “Out” or “Not Out” (Chesir-Teran

& Hughes, 2009). Finally, some studies were unclear when describing their measures (for an example, see Dibble, Sato, & Haller, 2007).

Limitations of Existing Outness Measures

Looking across measures of outness, it seems that many researchers have made potentially problematic assumptions about how to conceptualize outness. Some participants in studies where they were asked simply to state whether they were out or not by indicating “Yes” or “No” (e.g., Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009) likely had difficulty answering that item if they were out to some people in their lives but not to others. Measures that asked participants to rate their overall outness level without differentiating among social groups (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, etc.) may have missed important information about participants’ experiences of outness, such as cultural biases about being LGBTQ or feeling unsafe to come out at work due to a fear of being fired. Even when measures did give participants the opportunity to rate their outness for each of a set of social groups, researchers most often combined those ratings to achieve a single outness score by adding or averaging them, which seems to be based upon the assumption that outness to each of these groups is equally important or relevant to the participant. This, again, makes it difficult to hypothesize about how interactions with particular social groups might relate to an individual’s experience of outness.

The fact that an outness measure generates one overall score to describe an individual’s level of outness or that it does not measure every possible aspect of participants’ experiences of outness does not make it a weak measure for all purposes. It is certainly true that one score, as opposed to multiple scores representing multiple aspects of outness, is easier to incorporate into analyses of possible relationships among variables. However, it may be problematic to conceptualize outness as unidimensional and best represented by one score rather than

multidimensional and best represented by multiple scores. Measures that generate one overall score for outness may gloss over the complexities and variability involved with different individuals' experiences of outness. The variables that have been discussed in this paper—mental health, physical health, and relationship satisfaction—may have behavioral, cognitive, and emotional antecedents that vary across individuals. Further, potential interventions and treatments for disorders such as depression and anxiety or concerns such as increasing safe sex practices and reducing intimate partner violence may have behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components as well. For these reasons, it is important to consider *why* someone is or is not out—which may also involve behavioral, cognitive, and emotional factors—to certain individuals or groups in addition to *whether* that person is out to those individuals or groups when trying to investigate how outness might relate to health variables. With regard to these issues, existing outness measures, such as the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS) and the Outness Inventory (OI), and the studies in which these and similar outness measures are used, have some limitations that affect their utility for drawing meaningful conclusions about possible relationships between outness and health variables.

Although measuring both disclosure and concealment as separate constructs, as the NOS does, could be important for accounting for different elements of outness, there are some limitations to interpreting the Disclosure and Concealment subscale scores. Individuals who willingly disclosed their sexual orientation to their immediate family and individuals whose immediate family learned of their sexual orientation from another source may obtain the same score on the NOS-D (which only asks what percentage of each social group knows about one's sexual orientation) while having completely different experiences of disclosure. Similarly, individuals who actively conceal their sexual orientation at work because their state laws do not

protect them from being fired for being LGBTQ and individuals who actively conceal their sexual orientation at work because they fear that they will be ostracized from their coworkers may obtain the same score on the NOS-C while having completely different experiences of concealment. This scale—in addition to similar scales that separate disclosure from concealment—has some limitations for investigating exactly how those concepts relate to health variables because it is difficult to differentiate among participants' possible motives for disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation.

Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) Outness Inventory (OI), despite being widely used in research, has some noteworthy limitations. Meidlinger and Hope (2014) suggested that the authors of the OI were incorrect in assuming that more discussion about one's sexual orientation is associated with increased levels of outness and not with other factors, such as communicativeness within a given relationship or social/cultural norms that might facilitate or preclude such conversations. In other words, an individual is not "more out" just because he or she talks about his or her sexual orientation more than someone else. For example, two bisexual women might have mothers who definitely know about their sexual orientations, but one frequently discusses romantic interests with her mother and the other does not. These two women would likely provide different responses regarding their mothers on the OI, but it might not be accurate to say that one is "more out" than the other, especially if the mother and daughter who do not discuss romantic interests are estranged or simply do not have a close relationship. Meidlinger and Hope (2014) cautioned against conflating the concepts of talking more frequently or openly and demonstrating greater outness.

The language used in the OI may be confusing or may introduce negative emotional content into the measure. For instance, the OI presents participants with individuals (e.g.,

mother, father) and with groups (e.g., work peers, extended family members) for whom they are to select answer options. However, the answer options are all presented in singular form (e.g., “*person* might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about [emphasis added]”). This is not only grammatically confusing, but it also does not provide an opportunity for participants to indicate that they are out to some, but not all, members of a particular group, which could result in participants becoming confused about which answer option to select. In questions that assess the likelihood that a significant other knows about a respondent’s sexual orientation in addition to how much it is talked about, the OI presents items such as “person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, *but* it is rarely talked about” and “person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, *and* it is openly talked about” (p. 71, emphases added). The use of the word “but” in this context, in contrast to the use of the word “and,” might communicate to some participants a negative evaluation of a relationship in which their sexual orientation status is rarely talked about. This in turn may cause them to reflect negatively on their relationship with that significant other and could possibly even cause some distress, both of which could affect the responses they provide.

As I have mentioned above, scales created to measure outness, and the potential problems with those scales, are heavily informed by the way the authors conceptualize outness. Thus, it is important to critically examine conceptualizations of outness when considering the utility of particular outness measures, as well as of outness measures in general.

Conceptual Issues in Operationalizing Outness

Developing an operational definition of outness is not a simple or unproblematic task. Numerous factors could be considered relevant to a meaningful definition (e.g., the number of people to whom one is out, whether one chooses to disclose or to not conceal one’s sexual

orientation). However, researchers do not always include discussions of their conceptualizations of outness in describing their rationales for conducting particular studies. Indeed, Orne (2011) lamented researchers' "increasingly casual" (p. 681) use of the concept of coming out (a concept that is separate from, but related to, outness), saying that researchers tend to overlook the complexity of conceptualizing coming out and to leave out explanations of implications coming out may have for their analyses. He noted that he does not believe that researchers have intended to obscure the concept of coming out but rather that shared understanding is often incorrectly assumed.

Some researchers have included discussions of how they conceptualized outness when developing or choosing methods for measuring outness. Meidlinger and Hope (2014) were explicit in communicating their belief that making a distinction between disclosure and concealment of one's sexual orientation is necessary when measuring outness. Mohr and Fassinger (2000) included frequency or openness of discussions about one's sexual orientation status as an important element of their operational definition of outness.

Even when researchers have not provided a discussion of how they have conceptualized outness for a particular study, the methods they choose or create to measure outness allow readers to make inferences about those conceptualizations. Readers might infer that authors who use measures that ask participants to rate their outness to various social groups believe that the number of people or groups to whom one is out is important in conceptualizing outness and that each social group is equally important and relevant to an individual with an LGBTQ identity. Use of these measures also implies that researchers consider outness a relational trait rather than as an individual trait. In other words, for these researchers, outness may not be meaningful on the individual level; one must come out *to others*. Some researchers have considered coming out to

oneself meaningful (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996), and some measures of outness have included self-recognition of sexual orientation (Parks & Hughes, 2007), but I found few examples of these in my review. In addition, many researchers in the studies reviewed above used measures that allowed them to calculate a single overall outness “score,” which implies that, for these researchers, outness may have been conceptualized as quantifiable and unaffected by differing social and relational contexts.

Critiques of current conceptualizations of outness are few. Kluttz (2014), a political scientist who studies the actions and attitudes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) candidates running for political office, argued that how, where, and when LGBT candidates come out are equally as important as to whom they come out. It is possible that this information is important for conceptualizing outness among LGBQ individuals who are not running for political office as well. Current methods for measuring outness do not typically assess how, where, and when individuals come out.

Orne (2011) presented a concept he called “strategic outness”—a conceptualization of outness that takes into account social context and the way individuals manage others’ access to information about their identities over time. In Orne’s conceptualization, strategic outness is comprised of three components—strategies, motivations, and social context. Using a sample of 13 “coming out stories” (p. 686) written by gay men, Orne explained and provided examples for each of these components. Some strategies the men wrote about using were direct disclosure, reliance on leaving clues and allowing for speculation, and active concealment of their identities. Orne noted that very often the same man wrote about using multiple strategies, such as using direct disclosure with close friends and active concealment with family members. Frequently,

men's choices about which strategy to use were dependent on their motivations for making decisions about coming out or on the social context in which they made those decisions.

Orne (2011) described two main motivational perspectives among gay men engaging in outness management. First, some men in the study expressed fear that their coming out would damage important relationships or even threaten the health of particularly frail and intolerant others by causing them undue stress. Second, some men expressed a desire to avoid "living a lie" (p. 692) and an expectation that honesty about their sexual orientations would result in a happier, more liberated existence. The influence of each of these motivations was frequently dictated by the social context in which individuals make decisions about whether or not to come out.

The men in Orne's (2011) study wrote about making decisions about coming out to others in their lives based on the nature of their relationships with those others, including how close they considered those relationships. Orne referred to these factors as the "social contexts" (p. 696) in which gay men made decisions about coming out. In summary, Orne concluded that gay men's strategies, motivations, and social contexts work together such that they are always managing who knows and does not know about their sexual orientations. As a result, Orne concluded that "complete" (p. 699) outness is not an attainable goal; those with minority sexual orientation identities must always navigate these processes when they move among environments.

Some outness scales exist that align with Orne's (2011) strategic outness. Anderson et al.'s (2001) Workplace Sexual Identity Management Measure (WSIMM) assesses workplace outness across four domains—Passing (i.e., appearing as though one is heterosexual), Covering (i.e., actively concealing one's sexual orientation), Implicitly Out (i.e., dropping hints about

one's sexual orientation), and Explicitly Out (i.e., openly discussing one's sexual orientation). In this scale, participants are asked to rate how frequently they engage in behaviors related to each of these domains on a scale from 1 = *never/seldom* to 4 = *almost always/always* (p. 247). Lasser, Ryser, and Price's (2010) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual-Visibility Management Scale (LGB-VMS) consists of 28 items that fall into three subscales: Active Behavioral, Inhibitive Behavioral, and Setting. The Active Behavioral subscale assesses the extent to which an individual engages in behaviors that make his or her sexual orientation more visible. The Inhibitive Behavioral subscale assesses the extent to which an individual endorses various emotions associated with revealing his or her sexual orientation. Finally, the Setting subscale assesses the extent to which social settings play a role in individuals' decisions about how they manage the visibility of their sexual orientations. Both of these scales contain elements that align with parts of Orne's (2011) conceptualization of strategic outness (e.g., acknowledging the strategy of dropping hints about sexual orientation status rather than considering coming out as exclusively explicit, considering setting important to individuals' decisions about managing visibility of their sexual orientations). However, neither of these scales is widely used, perhaps because they were developed for particular settings or because they do not align with common conceptualizations of outness among researchers.

Orne (2011) concentrated primarily on the continual coming out *process*, whereas in this paper I have focused on conceptualizations of and measures of *being* out, or overall outness. However, these two concepts overlap considerably. Orne's work on coming out has provided a strong argument for reevaluating the utility of obtaining a single overall score as a way of describing someone's degree of outness. He also drew attention to the variety of experiences of

outness and coming out across individuals, suggesting that it might be fruitless to try to meaningfully synthesize effects of outness within sexual orientation identity populations.

There are certainly other questions that could be considered when conceptualizing or operationalizing outness. First, is verbal disclosure necessary? An individual could make his or her sexual orientation known by marrying a same-sex partner or joining a group for LGBTQ individuals. Many current measures focus on verbal disclosure as a way of measuring outness. Further, how much does someone need to disclose to be considered “out”? Is it enough to disclose that one is not heterosexual, or is more detail required for greater outness? In addition, if an individual is out to another person or group, it does not necessarily mean that that individual has come out to that person or group. The individual may have been “outed” by someone else, or others may have found out about their sexual orientation accidentally. Many current measures imply an assumption that if an individual is out, then it was their decision to be out. If this is not the case, interpretation of outness scores is further complicated.

It may also be important to question whether outness is uniformly relevant for everyone with a minority sexual orientation identity. Research has shown that it is not uncommon for sexual minority women to change how they conceptualize their sexual orientations over time (referred to as “sexual fluidity”; Diamond, 2000, 2008). Sexual fluidity in men has not been as widely studied, but it is reasonable to assume that some men have this experience as well. It is unclear how or whether outness is relevant to individuals who experience more fluidity in their sexual orientations. Many current conceptualizations of outness treat it as both additive and stable. In other words, in many conceptualizations, individuals move from “less out” to “more out” over time, and never the other way around. This may not describe the experience of

individuals with fluid sexual orientations, who might experience “coming out” multiple times throughout their lives as they adjust the way they conceptualize themselves.

Another issue in conceptualizing outness is determining how or whether outness is relevant for individuals who do not have sexual orientation minority identities. Quinn et al. (2014) investigated the effects of various elements, including outness, on psychological distress in individuals with “concealable stigmatized identities.” These identities included mental illness, substance abuse, experience of domestic violence, experience of sexual assault, and experience of childhood abuse. The authors found that, for this sample, less outness was associated with more psychological distress. Just as it is important to acknowledge that outness may not be uniformly relevant to all individuals with sexual orientation minority identities, it is also important not to assume that outness is exclusively relevant to that group.

Another population for which outness has not been investigated is heterosexual individuals. In a PsycINFO search using the search terms “heterosexual” and “outness,” no studies were returned that measured outness about heterosexual orientation. This may indicate a belief among researchers—and also perhaps within the general population—that outness is not relevant to those who identify as heterosexual. Although it may be the case that heterosexual individuals do not often think about how “out” they are, I was unable to locate any research on this topic. In addition, the assumption that outness is irrelevant to heterosexual individuals seems related to the belief that heterosexual individuals do not have to come out because most people assume everyone to be heterosexual unless told otherwise. This belief has been investigated in several studies (e.g., Martin, 2009; Rön Dahl, Innala, & Carlsson, 2006; Tolley & Ranzijn, 2006; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014), and a Google search of the phrase “straight until proven gay” returned numerous articles, blogs, and forum discussions focused on cautioning readers against making

this assumption. If there is a relationship between the ways in which heterosexual individuals consider—or do not consider—their own outness and problematic assumptions about sexual orientation in general, investigating experiences of outness in a heterosexual sample would be a good first step toward identifying it.

Present Study

It is clear that outness remains a relevant construct for LGBTQ individuals; same-sex marriage legalization has provided an additional framework within which individuals might choose to come out, and substantial anti-gay bias still exists in numerous contexts. The importance of outness is reflected in the large number of studies dedicated to investigating outness. However, the possibility that different people conceptualize outness differently could make research on outness hard to interpret. The lack of consensus about how to conceptualize outness and of a “gold standard” method for measuring outness may be one contributor to this problem. However, even measures that some might consider a gold standard, such as the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), have certain limitations. In addition, I know of no study that has asked participants follow-up questions about the answers they provided on an outness measure or that has asked participants to comment on their experience of the measure or on the utility of the measure as they perceive it. In conducting the present study I had several goals. I qualitatively and quantitatively investigated how participants’ conceptualized their own outness. I also investigated participants’ experiences with completing the Outness Inventory (OI) and the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS). I identified strengths and weaknesses participants attributed to the OI and the NOS and determined whether they believed their scores on these measures accurately corresponded to their conceptualizations of their own outness. I synthesized this information to make suggestions for improvements in conceptualizing and measuring

outness in general and presented a perspective on how or whether to investigate health-related correlates of outness. Outness is a complex concept, and it may be that current practices for detecting such correlates and identifying practical implications for those findings result in oversimplification of outness.

I chose to include the Outness Inventory (OI) because it was the most widely used measure of outness in the literature review I conducted. Since the OI was created in 2000 it was used in over half of the studies included in my review. A PsycINFO search using the search term “Outness Inventory” in the “Test and Measure” section returned 72 results; widening the search by changing the search terms to “outness” and “coming out” returned 92 results. Further, even in studies in which the OI itself was not used to measure outness, authors often used measures that have content similar to the OI (e.g., asking about outness to various social groups such as family, friends, and coworkers).

I chose to include the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS) because the authors of this scale presented it as a more sensitive alternative to the OI, which they considered problematic in some ways. Although the NOS is not widely used, its separation of disclosure and concealment as distinct elements of outness creates flexibility in how the scale is used. Specifically, researchers may use the overall outness score in their analyses, or they may use the Disclosure and Concealment scores separately in their analyses.

I hoped to answer several research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do participants conceptualize outness about sexual orientation when given no specific guidelines for how to do so? What explanations do they give for the answers they provide? At the beginning of the questionnaire, I asked participants to respond to an open-ended question asking how “out” they feel. Most studies have provided

researcher-imposed contexts for survey questions about outness; for example, they might have defined which social groups are important to include in a participants' overall outness score, or they might have differentiated between disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation. Very few studies have given participants the opportunity to describe their own outness or to explain their responses to outness scale items. I hoped to determine what is important to participants when they considered their own outness with a minimum of researcher influence. These responses provided information that could be compared with participants' responses to subsequent, similar questions with researcher-imposed answer options.

RQ2: How do participants' scores on the Outness Inventory and the Nebraska Outness Scale align with self-estimated outness scores, and what explanations do participants provide for any differences between scores? I asked participants to estimate their own outness "score" on a scale from 0 = *not at all out* to 100 = *completely out* before completing the OI and the NOS. I then provided them with their OI and NOS scores and asked them to compare the three scores. I hoped to see whether the participants regarded the OI and/or the NOS as accurately assessing their outness.

RQ3: What do participants think about the idea of measuring outness in general? What do they consider elements of a good measure of outness? I asked two questions about what a good measure of outness would include and about participants' thoughts about measuring outness in general.

RQ4: How are heterosexual participants' responses to the same survey similar to and different from nonheterosexual participants' responses? I administered the survey to heterosexual participants in addition to nonheterosexual participants to gather information about how or whether heterosexual participants considered their outness about sexual orientation.

RQ5: Were any other themes present in the data? I looked for any additional themes that participants mentioned in case they expressed ideas I had not anticipated in their responses.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service. Participants from this source are community members from across the United States who participate in various tasks, including social science research, for monetary compensation. This recruitment source allowed me to easily oversample nonheterosexual participants, as well as to access participants with greater age and race/ethnicity diversity than I might have found in a university sample.

Initially, 221 participants responded to the study. Twenty-one participants were deleted due to excessive missing data, 16 were deleted because they participated in the survey multiple times, and 5 were deleted because they participated in the survey outside of the U.S. In addition, 7 participants were deleted because they provided confusing or difficult to interpret responses that seemed related to limited fluency in English. Finally, two participants were deleted because they provided responses that appeared to be pasted in from other sources.

The final sample consisted of 170 participants, including 81 (48%) women and 89 (52%) men. For race or ethnicity, 115 (68 %) of the participants reported identifying as European American/White; 18 (11%), as Hispanic American/Latina/Latino; 13 (8%), as African American/Black; 13 (8%), as Asian American/Asian; 1 (1%), as Native American/American Indian; and 9 (5%), as biracial/multiracial; 1 (1%) did not identify their race or ethnicity. Their ages ranged from 18 to 58 years, with a mean of 30.96. Of the 122 nonheterosexual participants,

45 (37%) reported identifying as bisexual; 38 (31%), as a gay man; 28 (23%), as a lesbian/gay woman; 8 (7%), as pansexual; 2 (2%), as fluid; and 1 (<1%), as queer.

Procedure

I created four MTurk postings (referred to as Human Intelligence Tasks, or HITs) with the intent of oversampling nonheterosexual participants. The four HITs contained identical questionnaires, but they were advertised separately to female nonheterosexual participants, male nonheterosexual participants, female heterosexual participants, and male heterosexual participants. I capped the surveys at larger numbers for nonheterosexual participants (75 participants each for female and male nonheterosexual participants) than for heterosexual participants (25 participants each for female and male heterosexual participants). Participants who signed up for the study were provided with a link that directed them to an information statement (see Appendix A) and to the online questionnaire. They were informed that no identifying information would be attached to the responses they provided in any publication or presentation of the data. They were also informed that their participation in the survey would act as their consent to participate in the study. Participants completed the questionnaire online at their convenience and were paid \$2.00 for their participation. After participants completed the questionnaire, they were directed to a debriefing statement that gave them more information about the study's topic and informed them about how to contact the researchers and the IRB (see Appendix B).

Questionnaire

Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire (see Appendix C). After a brief set of demographic questions, participants were asked to respond to a number of open-

ended and multiple-choice questions about their conceptualizations and experiences of outness about sexual orientation. These questions were presented in three sections.

In the first section, participants were asked to explain how “out” they are about their sexual orientation, as well as to estimate their level of outness on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 = *not at all out* and 100 = *completely out*. They were then asked to explain why they chose the rating they did. In the second section, participants were asked to complete the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) and the Nebraska Outness Scale (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014) as the authors intended (described below).

After completing the OI and the NOS, participants were provided with their score on each of the scales and reminded of the outness score they estimated for themselves earlier in the survey. They were asked to compare these three scores and to provide possible explanations for any differences among the scores. In the third section, participants were asked what a good measure of outness would take into account. They were also asked whether they believed outness can be measured accurately in general.

Outness Inventory. Participants were shown the instructions for the Outness Inventory as written by the authors (Mohr, 2011). The instructions read,

Use the following rating scale to indicate how open you are about your sexual orientation to the people listed below. Try to respond to all of the items, but leave items blank if they do not apply to you. If an item refers to a group of people (e.g., work peers), then indicate how out you generally are to that group.

The rating scale was designed as follows:

1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status

2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about

3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about

4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about

5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about

6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is sometimes talked about

7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about

0 = not applicable to your situation; there is no such person or group of people in your life

Participants were asked to rate each of 11 people or social groups according to the above rating scale. These groups included the participant's mother, father, siblings, extended family, new straight friends, work peers, work supervisors, members of their religious community, leaders of their religious community, strangers, and old heterosexual friends. A "Not Applicable (N/A)" option was included in the event that there was no such person or group in the participant's life. The items were formatted as similarly to the authors' as was possible using Qualtrics survey software (see Appendix D for screenshots of how participants viewed the scale).

Nebraska Outness Scale. Participants were shown the Nebraska Outness Scale as written by the authors (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; p. 497). The NOS-D (Disclosure subscale) portion read, "What percent of the people in this group do you think are aware of your sexual orientation (meaning they are aware of whether you consider yourself straight, gay, etc.)?" The

groups included immediate family, extended family, people the participant socializes with, people at the participants work/school, and strangers. Participants were asked to respond on an 11-point scale indicating the percentage of the people in each group they thought were aware of their sexual orientation. The scale was arranged from 0% to 100% in increments of 10%.

The NOS-C (Concealment subscale) portion read, “How often do you avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating your sexual orientation (e.g., not talking about your significant other, changing your mannerisms) when interacting with members of these groups?” The groups were the same as those included in the NOS-D (described above). Participants were asked to respond on an 11-point scale from “Never” to “Always,” with a mid-point of “Half of the Time.” The items were formatted as similarly to the authors’ as was possible using Qualtrics survey software (see Appendix D for screenshots of how participants viewed the scale).

Scoring

One of the authors of the Outness Inventory created a website with scoring and formatting instructions for the scale (Mohr, 2011). He suggested several approaches to scoring the measure. Recall that the OI is divided into three subscales: Out to Family, Out to World, and Out to Religion. Mohr stated that the standard method for scoring the measure is to calculate scores for each subscale by averaging the scores for each item associated with the subscale. Items related to the participant’s mother, father, siblings, and extended family comprise the Out to Family subscale; items related to the participant’s new straight friends, work peers, work supervisors, and strangers comprise the Out to World subscale; and items related to members and leaders of the participants’ religious community comprise the Out to Religion subscale. The item related to the participant’s old heterosexual friends loaded strongly on both the Out to Family and the Out to World subscales, so the authors did not include it in any of the subscales.

After the subscale scores are calculated, the overall outness score is obtained by averaging those three scores.

Mohr noted that some circumstances might change the way the OI is scored. First, he stated that researchers are free to use the “old heterosexual friends” item as they see fit. Specifically, he stated, “if you are using the overall measure of outness, then it may make sense to include [this] item” (Mohr, 2011, p. 2). However, he did not include recommendations for how to include this item in the calculation of the overall outness measure. Second, he provided some suggestions for dealing with missing or “Not Applicable” responses. Mohr advised that the overall outness measure for situations in which a participant did not respond to all items could be obtained by calculating the “average of all items for which ratings are available” (Mohr, 2011, p. 2). I will discuss concerns about the clarity and utility of these instructions in a later section.

I chose to calculate overall OI scores by taking the average of all items for which scores were available rather than taking the average of the three subscales. I anticipated that several participants would either leave items blank or choose the “N/A” option for one or more items. In addition, I anticipated that some participants were likely to respond to both religion items with “Not Applicable” or to leave both blank. Mohr did not clearly describe how to score the OI when an entire subscale was blank or “Not Applicable.” Averaging the individual items allowed me to score all participants in the same way regardless of their response pattern. OI scores calculated in this manner were the scores shown to participants during the survey. For the purpose of comparing the two scoring systems, I also calculated the overall outness score using the means of the three subscales. I will discuss this comparison in a later section.

The authors of the Nebraska Outness Scale advised that the full-scale NOS is obtained by calculating the mean of all the individual items on the scale (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). However, because the Disclosure subscale is formatted so that higher scores indicate more outness, and the Concealment subscale is formatted so that lower scores indicate more outness, the Concealment subscale scores must be reversed before calculating the full-scale NOS score. This ensures that higher scores on the NOS-D, NOS-C, and full-scale NOS always indicate greater outness.

For both the OI scores and the NOS scores, I performed a linear transformation such that scores would range from 0 (not at all out) to 100 (completely out). This allowed participants to more easily compare their OI and NOS scores with their self-estimated sliding scale scores.

Coding the Qualitative Data

I analyzed the qualitative data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I took an inductive approach, creating themes to fit my data instead of analyzing my data within an existing theoretical framework. With a group of four undergraduate research assistants, I read the responses and identified tentative themes related to participants' conceptualizations of outness, their concerns about the OI and the NOS, and their thoughts about how to measure outness. Using a constant comparison approach (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000; Parry, 2004), we refined and clarified themes as we read the data. Once we agreed on a final set of themes, we coded the themes present in each narrative.

Results

Nonheterosexual participants' qualitative responses were organized into three primary categories, each comprised of several subthemes. The three primary categories are conceptualizing outness, comparing and critiquing the scales, and participants' thoughts on

measuring outness. These themes and quotes illustrating them are presented below.

Heterosexual participants' responses are discussed separately. Participants' responses are quoted verbatim, without corrected spelling, punctuation, etc. Quantitative analyses are presented just before the "comparing and critiquing the scales" results.

Conceptualizing Outness

Participants reported taking many things into consideration when conceptualizing their own outness and outness in general. Table 1 shows the conceptualizations of outness themes I identified and the number of nonheterosexual women and men who mentioned each theme.

Table 1

Conceptualizations of Outness Themes for Nonheterosexual Participants

Themes	Women (<i>n</i> = 62)	Men (<i>n</i> = 60)
Disclosure and concealment	57 (92%)	55 (92%)
Who knows about my sexual orientation?	49 (79%)	40 (67%)
Self-acceptance	21 (34%)	10 (17%)
Engaging in "socially accepted" behavior	9 (15%)	6 (10%)
Outness is fluid	4 (6%)	3 (5%)
Other	7 (11%)	18 (30%)

Note. Table entries are the numbers and percentages of nonheterosexual women and men who reported each theme. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants reported multiple themes.

Disclosure and concealment. Almost all nonheterosexual participants mentioned the issues of disclosure and/or concealment when describing their own outness and when defining outness in general. These issues manifested in various ways in participants' responses.

Most often, participants wrote about considering disclosure and concealment of their sexual orientation in tandem when describing outness. For example, when asked for her definition of outness, one lesbian woman wrote, "Being open about who I like romantically and am attracted to. Not hiding my relationship in any way, no matter who I'm with or where" (F, 34, #13). Another wrote, "I make it known who I am with. I don't keep my sexuality a secret" (F, 32, #17). For these participants, along with others who gave similar responses, disclosure and concealment of their sexual orientation seemed to be equally relevant to their conceptualizations and manifestations of outness.

Other participants emphasized or deemphasized disclosure or concealment of their sexual orientation. For example, a bisexual man wrote that he is "not hiding but not advertising" his sexual orientation (M, 35, #41). This participant seemed to be emphasizing *not* concealing his sexual orientation while also deemphasizing disclosing his sexual orientation. In contrast, some participants seemed to emphasize disclosing their sexual orientation, such as the fluid woman who wrote, "I have no problem telling people about my sexuality" (F, 27, #6). Participants who emphasized concealing their sexual orientation were typically participants who did not consider themselves out, such as the pansexual man who wrote, "I mostly keep it to myself" (M, 22, #18).

Participants gave differing reasons for making decisions about disclosure and concealment of their sexual orientation. For instance, many participants described disclosing their sexual orientation openly, while also taking into consideration the context of their disclosure. Some of these participants emphasized that their sexual orientation is not a topic

relevant to all conversations. One bisexual woman wrote that she does not “boast about it to everyone I meet and it just comes up as is needed” (F, 25, #153). Other participants stated that their decisions about disclosing personal information were not limited to their sexual orientation.

A gay man wrote:

Being out is being out to the people who matter most to you. ... Beyond that is up to the person if they want to share personal details of their life with others. I think it depends on the circumstances because I personally am private about every aspect of my life, so I don't like people knowing everything about me unless I like them (M, 34, #55).

Finally, some participants reported making decisions about whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation to others based on fear or potential danger. Participants who reported this consideration were almost exclusively nonheterosexual men. One bisexual man wrote, “I haven't been actively keeping it a secret or anything, but have been more guarded since the recent hate crimes” (M, 23, #132). A gay man wrote, “I stay closeted/don't discuss it openly in situations where it may be unsafe to do so” (M, 22, #111). Despite describing situations in which they have typically withheld information about their sexual orientation, two of the above participants rated themselves 100 (completely out) on the sliding scale (M, 34, #55; M, 22, #111). For these participants, withholding discussions about their sexual orientation in some circumstances did not necessarily result in conceptualizing themselves as less out.

Several participants also wrote about nonverbal methods of disclosure and concealment. These methods included attending Pride events, engaging in public displays of affection with same-sex partners, including their sexual orientation in their social media presence, and assuming that something about their appearance communicates their sexual orientation to others. A gay man stated that he considered himself out because “I attend Pride events quite often.

Also, I go to gay clubs and other events catered for the gay lifestyle” (M, 30, #78). Another responded, “I go to gay bars, gay parties, and I make out with my man in public” (M, 27, #89). Some participants defined outness as “being open about it on social media” (M, 30, #72), or wrote comments such as, “I also have publicly stated that I am bi sexual on facebook” (F, 23, #127), and, “I know it’s silly, but my Facebook profile also says that I am pansexual” (F, 28, #154). Some participants mentioned considering themselves out because they “look kind of butch” (F, 34, #13) are “noticeably lesbian” (F, 22, #110), or because it is “completely obvious that I’m gay” (M, 31, #158). Participants’ descriptions of these nonverbal aspects of outness differed from descriptions of verbal manifestations of disclosure and concealment in that it was not always clear whether participants who described nonverbal methods of communicating outness considered them methods of disclosing their sexual orientation or examples of not concealing their sexual orientation.

Who knows about my sexual orientation? Another widespread consideration when conceptualizing outness was a focus on how many and/or which people in a participant’s life know about their sexual orientation. This theme manifested in several different ways.

When describing their experiences of outness, many participants focused on who in particular knew about their sexual orientation. For many of these participants, their family’s knowledge of their sexual orientation was particularly important. One gay man wrote that his definition of being out included “having those around me know that I am gay, especially having family know because for me, them finding out was the hardest thing” (M, 29, #148). For one lesbian woman, the fact that her family was unaware of her sexual orientation was her primary consideration when assessing her outness. When asked if she considers herself out, she indicated

“No” and wrote, “The fact that I haven’t come out to my parents is why I consider myself closeted,” despite also stating, “I am always out with friends and acquaintances” (F, 30, #113).

Several participants indicated that the quality or closeness of their relationships with others played a role in determining how important those others were to their experience of outness, regardless of the title of their relationship. For example, a lesbian woman wrote that she considered herself out because “my closest friends, closest colleagues, and closest family know about my sexual orientation” (F, 28, #126). A bisexual man wrote that his definition of outness included “the majority of my inner circle being aware of my sexual orientation” (M, 20, #143). A bisexual woman wrote, “If you care about a person and their opinion of you, do they know that you identify as something other than straight? If yes, then you’re out” (F, 24, #85).

Other participants reported assessing their outness based on how many people know about their sexual orientation without specific emphasis on the quality of the relationships they had with those people. A bisexual woman wrote, “My definition of being out is telling everyone that you are lesbian, gay or bi etc and not hiding it from anyone” (F, 23, #127). Similarly, a gay man wrote, “I believe someone that is out is open about their sexuality. They do not hide any aspect about being gay and everyone that is in their life including co-workers, family and friends are all aware about your sexuality” (M, 30, #78). Most of the participants who described this approach seemed to imply that “complete” outness is not possible if there are people who do not know about one’s sexual orientation.

These differing approaches to describing outness sometimes became apparent when participants explained their rationale for the outness score they assigned themselves on the 0-100 sliding scale. For example, some participants seemed to interpret “100” as referring to everyone they have met. One gay man assigned himself a 93 on the sliding scale and explained, “I am out

to everyone in my life, but I don't announce it to strangers when I first meet them unless they're curious" (M, 34, #141). A bisexual woman assigned herself a 1 on the sliding scale and explained, "I chose almost 'not at all out' because technically there are some people—my romantic partners—that know about my sexual orientation" (F, 24, #83).

Other participants seemed to interpret "100" as referring to everyone important to them. A bisexual woman assigned herself a 3 on the sliding scale and explained, "If 100% represented telling all the 'important' people in family and all my friends that I interact with, 3 is the number of people that do know" (F, 28, #188). A pansexual man assigned himself a 100 on the sliding scale and expressed anger at the idea that he might be considered less out if strangers were not aware of his sexual orientation. He wrote, "It's ridiculous that I have to talk about my sexuality to people I don't know, or barely know, to be 100% out" (M, 30, #46). These examples suggest that participants' varying conceptualizations of outness drove them to interpret and respond to even a simple measure of outness very differently from one another.

Self-acceptance. Several participants reported that self-acceptance, pride in their sexual orientation, or lack of shame about their sexual orientation was integral to demonstrating outness.

Most participants who mentioned this theme stated that self-acceptance and pride in their sexual orientation were positive attributes that were indicative of increased outness for them. A bisexual woman wrote that she considered herself out because "I proudly display rainbow PRIDE symbols and do not take it personal when people look down on us" (F, 54, #16). A bisexual man wrote, "As far as my openness about my sexuality goes, 'Loud and proud' describes it well" (M, 26, #123). Often, participants reported feeling happy and authentic when describing outness in this way. For example, a gay man explained that he considered himself

completely out because “I am happy and comfortable with my true self” (M, 38, #70). A bisexual woman wrote, “I feel more free and connected to who I really am when I do not feel afraid to show off how I behave” (F, 26, #190).

Conversely, a few participants reported that shame about their sexual orientation was a barrier to outness for them. For instance, a pansexual man who indicated that he was not out wrote that, for him, outness “probably has to do with accepting myself for who I am, which I currently don’t” (M, 30, #67). A lesbian woman who indicated that she was not out wrote:

I don’t know if I will ever be able to come out, I hate people judging me and my life and beliefs. I am so ashamed of myself. ... I am so sick and tired of holding back and being quiet, while I listen to people and their gay bashing. I hate the way it makes me feel, I feel like a fake and a liar (F, 48, #129).

For some participants, outness was deeply connected to their views about themselves and their ability to live an authentic life.

Engaging in “socially accepted” behavior. Some participants drew a comparison between their own behaviors regarding their sexual orientations and behaviors they perceive as expected for heterosexual individuals. For example, a lesbian woman wrote, “I don’t announce orientation in contexts when a heterosexual wouldn’t either” (F, 58, #114). Another said, “I don’t make it a point to broadcast my sexuality, and don’t believe I would if I were heterosexual” (F, 47, #136). While the two previous examples emphasized the expectation that heterosexual individuals do not often explicitly declare their sexual orientation, one gay man also touched on the expectation that heterosexual individuals speak freely about their sexual and romantic partners. He wrote that outness involves “speaking periodically about your partner when

conversations arise. Not doing it purposely but if the conversation gives place then speak just the same as a heterosexual person” (M, 44, #150).

A few nonmonosexual participants also discussed how their outness is affected when they are with same-sex and other-sex partners. Most of these participants were women. A bisexual woman described the way her current partner affects strangers’ perceptions of her sexual orientation. “They might know if they see me kissing or holding hands with another woman but since I am dating a man that would never happen now” (F, 29, #52). A pansexual woman who is married to a man wrote, “As a married woman, the topic of my sexuality literally never comes into conversation, and it’s not something anyone would ever question” (F, 29, #137). A bisexual woman summarized the complexity of being visibly out for nonmonosexual individuals: “In some cases, like those of bi- or pan-sexual people, ‘out’ behavior may not seem ‘out’ since their choice at the time might be the socially accepted one” (F, 33, #191). Although some participants seemed comfortable with this possibility, others seemed less so. One bisexual woman wrote, “I feel that now because I have a male partner people consider me to be heterosexual and it makes me feel like I am less out in a weird way” (F, 25, #203). Demonstrating outness may be more complex for nonmonosexual individuals than it is for monosexual individuals.

Outness is fluid. A small number of participants wrote that their level of outness changes depending on some aspect or aspects of their environment. A gay man expressed his belief that outness is “fluid and can change from day to day” (M, 30, #102). A lesbian woman said of outness, “I believe it could fluctuate as well. For instance I’m a lot more open when I’m with other LGBT people vs if I’m with a bunch of strangers on a bus” (F, 30, #162). A bisexual woman described a phenomenon she called the “radius effect,” stating, “I am more ‘out’ when further from my workplace and even more so when I’m somewhere else on vacation or things

like that” (F, 33, #191). Another gay man’s response summarized these thoughts: “‘Outness’ changes constantly depending on the situation and the kind of people in your life. Coming out is a constant process and not really a one time thing” (M, 22, #111). These responses suggest that an individual’s description of their outness may not remain stable over time or across situations and environments.

Quantitative Comparisons of the Scales

The many conceptualizations of outness described above likely influenced how participants responded to the sliding scale, the Outness Inventory (OI), and the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS). This manifested both quantitatively, in how participants’ scores on these measures matched up with their own self-estimated outness scores, and qualitatively, in the concerns participants raised about their experiences completing the scales.

Recall that the sliding scale asked participants to indicate how out they feel on a scale from 0 to 100. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of participants’ responses on this measure. The OI asked participants to indicate how likely it was that various individuals and groups in their lives knew about their sexual orientation status and how often or openly it was talked about. The NOS was divided into Disclosure and Concealment subscales (NOS-D and NOS-C, respectively). The Disclosure subscale asked participants to estimate what percentage of various groups they thought were aware of their sexual orientation. The Concealment subscale asked participants to rate how often they avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating their sexual orientation when interacting with members of those same groups.

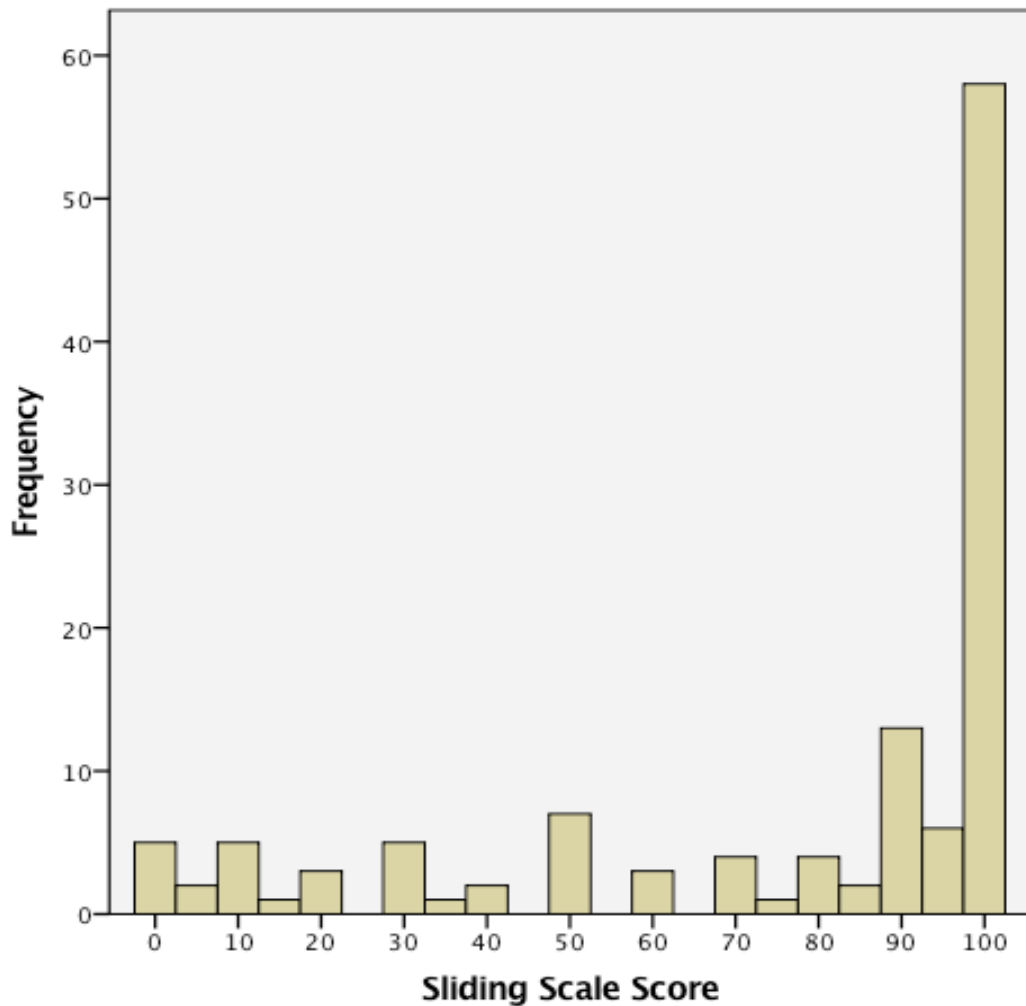


Figure 1. Histogram showing frequency of responses to the sliding scale measure of outness for all nonheterosexual participants.

Before quantitatively investigating outness scores, I recoded the OI scores of three participants (M, 27, #27; M, 25, #106; F, 34, #186). These participants assigned themselves 100s on the sliding scale but scored 0s on the Outness Inventory. Their individual response patterns showed that they responded “N/A” to all of the response options on the OI. Because the “N/A” column was located all the way to the right (see Appendix D), it seems likely that these

participants assumed that the rightmost column indicated the most outness. After reviewing the OI on the author's website (Mohr, 2011), I determined that this mistake was likely due to how the OI was presented in our survey. Based on their qualitative responses (e.g., "I'm open about my sexual preferences ... nothing is a secret"; F, 34, #186; "i am completely out"; M, 25, #106), I decided it was reasonable to infer that the participants meant to indicate that all social groups "definitely know about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about," so I adjusted their OI scores accordingly.

All of the quantitative outness measures correlated positively and significantly with one another, although the correlations spanned a wide range. Table 2 shows correlations among all quantitative outness measures for nonheterosexual participants. The OI and the NOS-D were correlated the most strongly with one another, which was not surprising because both ask about disclosing one's sexual orientation. Similarly unsurprising was the relatively weak correlation between the NOS-D and the NOS-C given that the authors of the NOS found that these two subscales measure distinct constructs (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). The sliding scale measure was correlated the most strongly with the OI and the NOS-D and the least strongly with the NOS-C. One explanation for these findings could be that our participants may have conceptualized being out as disclosing their sexual orientation status rather than as not concealing their sexual orientation status. Another explanation could be that the authors of the NOS conflated the concept of avoiding talking about or otherwise indicating sexual orientation with the concept of concealing one's sexual orientation on the Concealment subscale of the NOS. Several participants provided qualitative responses to the NOS-C that supported this explanation; these responses will be discussed in a later section.

Table 2

Correlations Among Outness Scores

	Sliding Scale	OI	NOS-Full	NOS-D	NOS-C
Sliding Scale	1.00	--	--	--	--
OI ^a	.844**	1.00	--	--	--
NOS-Full ^b	.797**	.825**	1.00	--	--
NOS-D ^c	.898**	.915**	.889**	1.00	--
NOS-C ^d	.483**	.515**	.866**	.540**	1.00
Cronbach's alpha	--	.935	.904	.920	.900

Notes. This table excludes six nonheterosexual participants who appeared to have misread one or both of the scales ($n = 116$). Full-scale NOS scores were calculated from the NOS-D and NOS-C, so correlations between the full-scale NOS and its components are not surprising and not especially meaningful.

^a Outness Inventory

^b Nebraska Outness Scale-Full scale

^c Nebraska Outness Scale-Disclosure subscale

^d Nebraska Outness Scale-Concealment subscale

** $p < .01$

Scatter plots of participants' scores on these measures are presented in Figures 2 through 5. Some interesting patterns emerged, particularly when comparing participants' sliding scale scores (self-estimated on a scale from 0 to 100) with their scores on the scales assessing outness (i.e., the OI, full scale NOS, NOS-D, and NOS-C). For each of these comparisons, there were some participants whose scores aligned well with one another and some participants whose scores differed from one another substantially. For each of the following sets of scatter plots, the first shows all nonheterosexual participants, and the second shows nonheterosexual participants with six participants who misread at least one of the scales removed (these participants will be discussed in a later section).

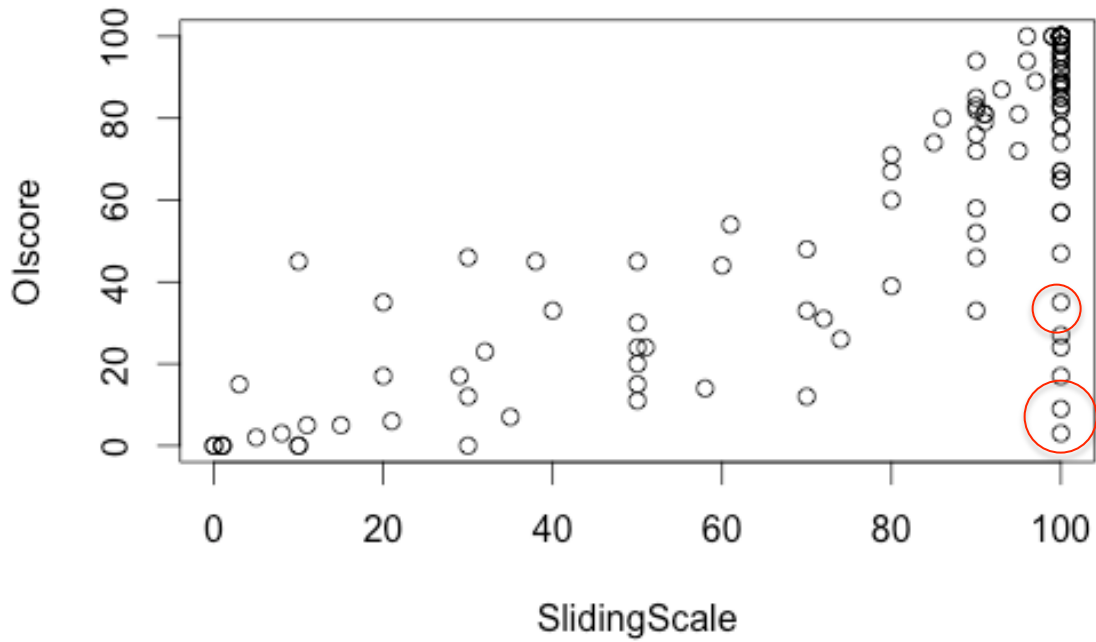


Figure 2a. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Outness Inventory scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

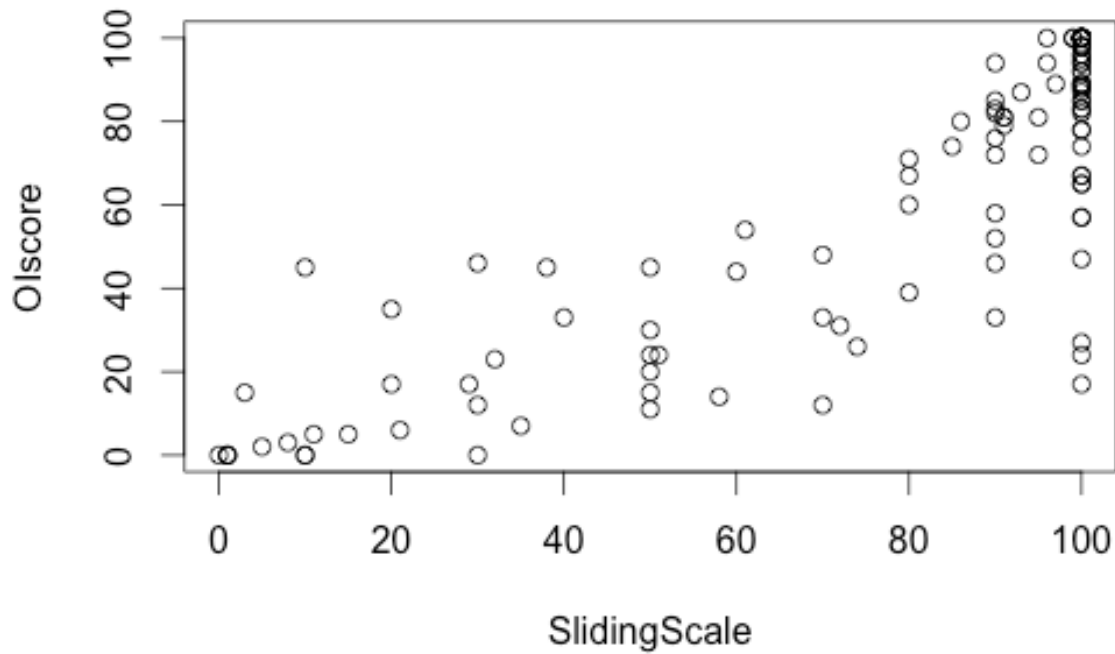


Figure 2b. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Outness Inventory scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

Figure 2 shows scatter plots comparing participants' sliding scale scores with their scores on the OI. In general, participants scored lower on the OI than their self-estimated sliding scale scores. Participants whose OI scores were lower than their sliding scale scores had several ideas about why this had happened, which will be explored in detail in later sections. For example, some wrote that the OI emphasized talking about sexual orientation more than they did, that they had included fewer people in their definition of outness than the OI did, or that the OI gave more weight to certain social groups than they did.

There were also a few participants who scored higher on the OI than their self-estimated sliding scale scores. The participant for whom this difference was most extreme (sliding scale = 10; OI = 45) seemed to have a slightly different understanding of outness than did many of our other nonheterosexual participants. This participant was a gay man who defined outness as a "change of sexual orientation," writing that he believes he is not out because "sometimes i feel differently and attract for different gender. But mostly i was not out of my sexual orientation" (M, 24, #164). This participant's difference in sliding scale and OI scores was likely due in part to the fact that his understanding of outness was very different from what the OI attempted to measure.

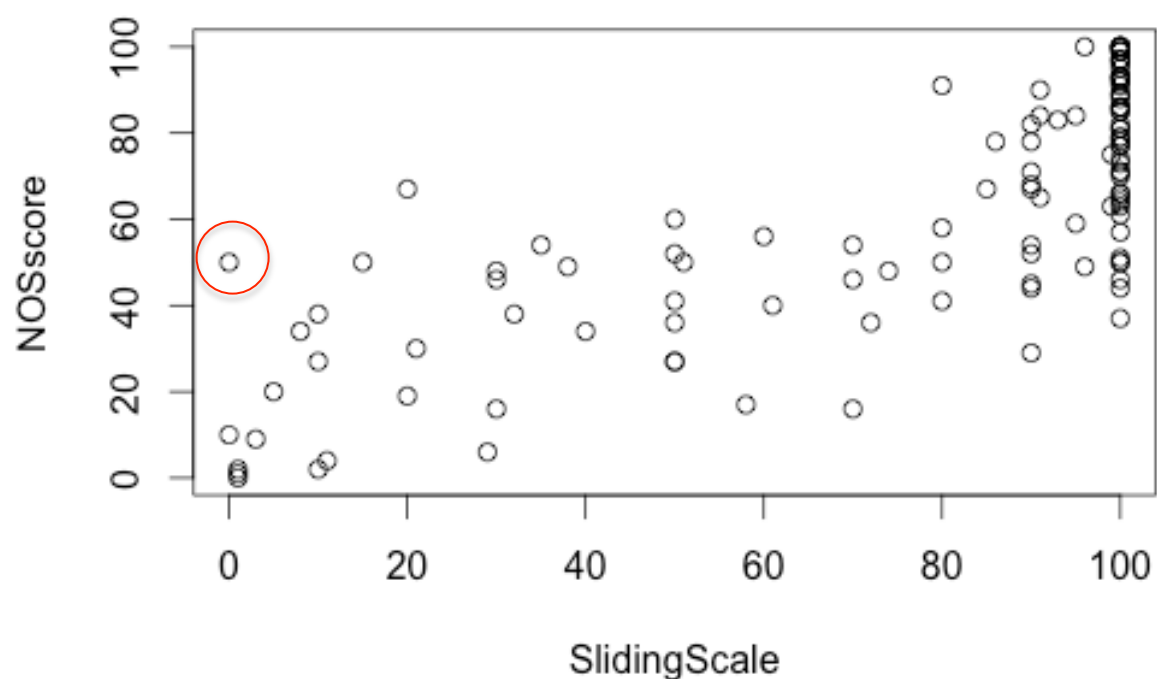


Figure 3a. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

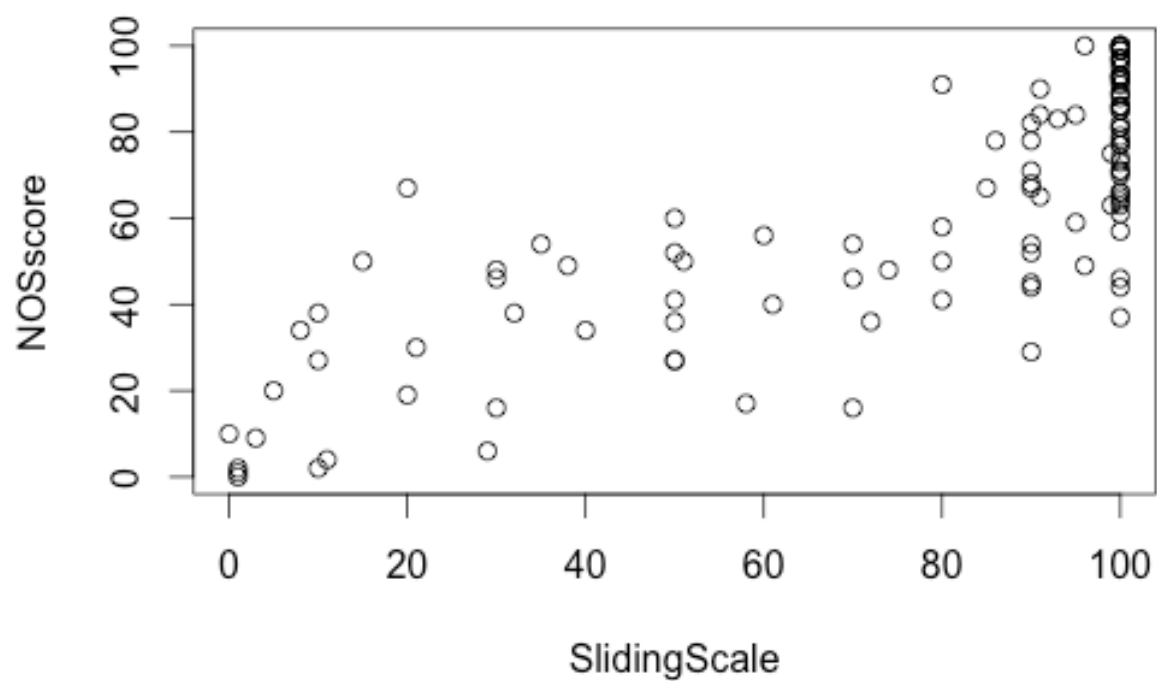


Figure 3b. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

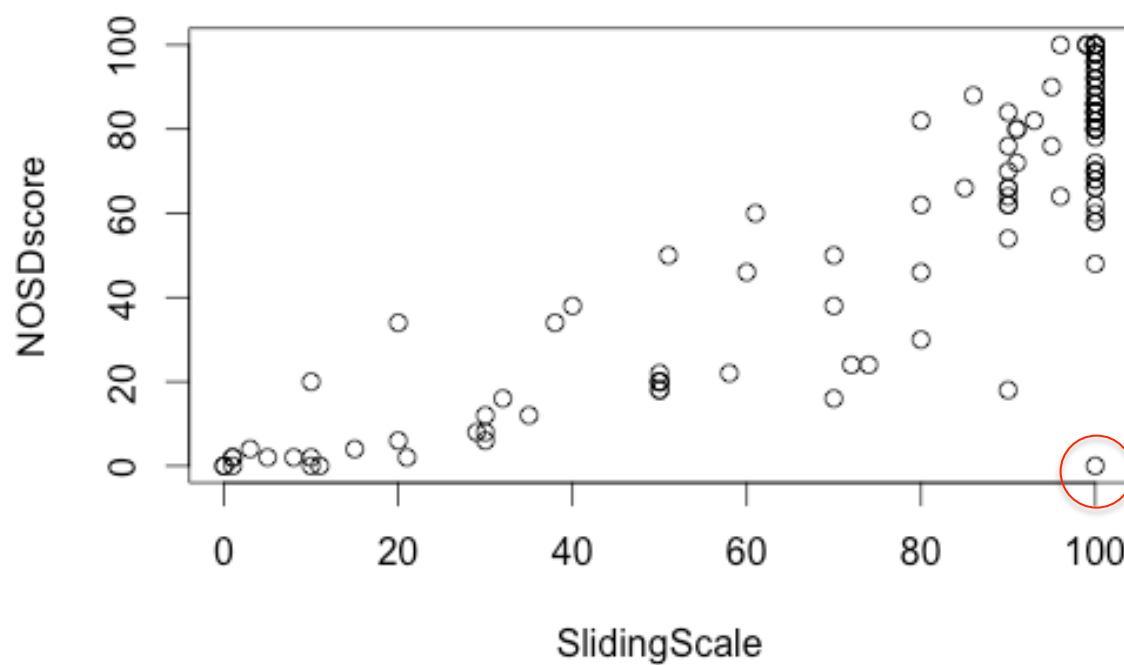


Figure 4a. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale – Disclosure subscale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

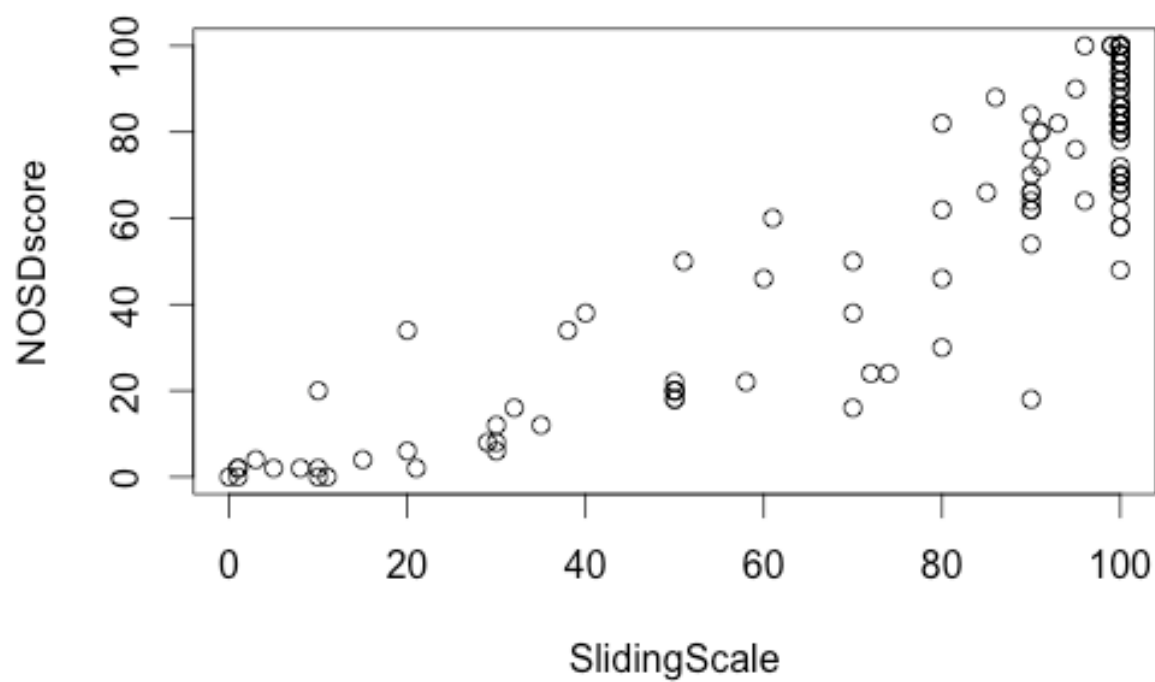


Figure 4b. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale – Disclosure subscale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

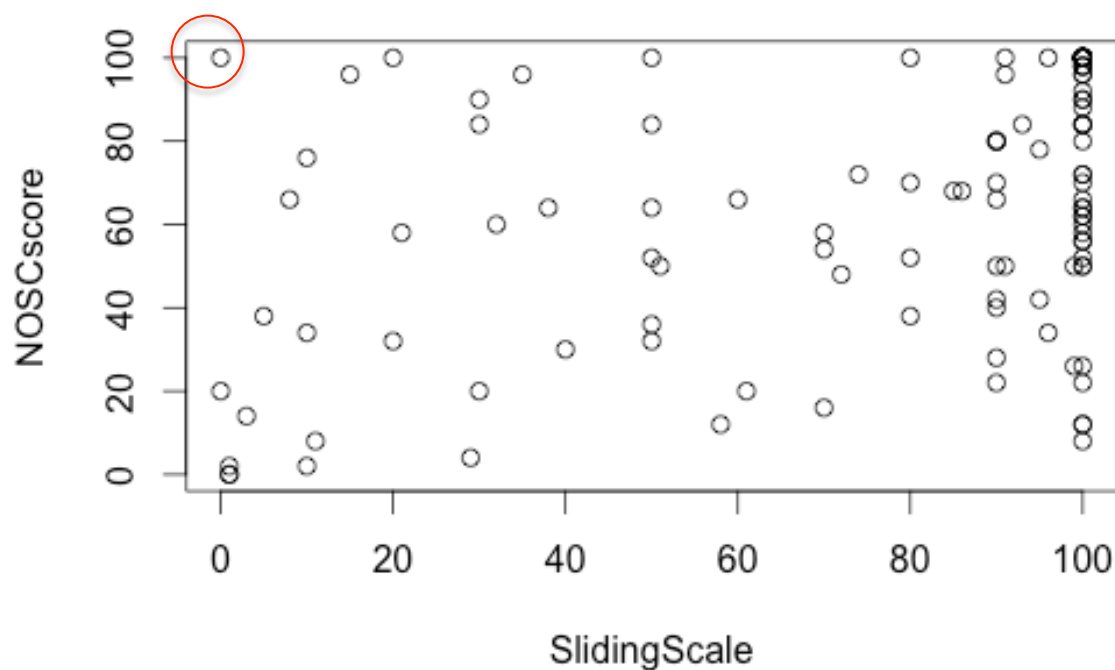


Figure 5a. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale – Concealment subscale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

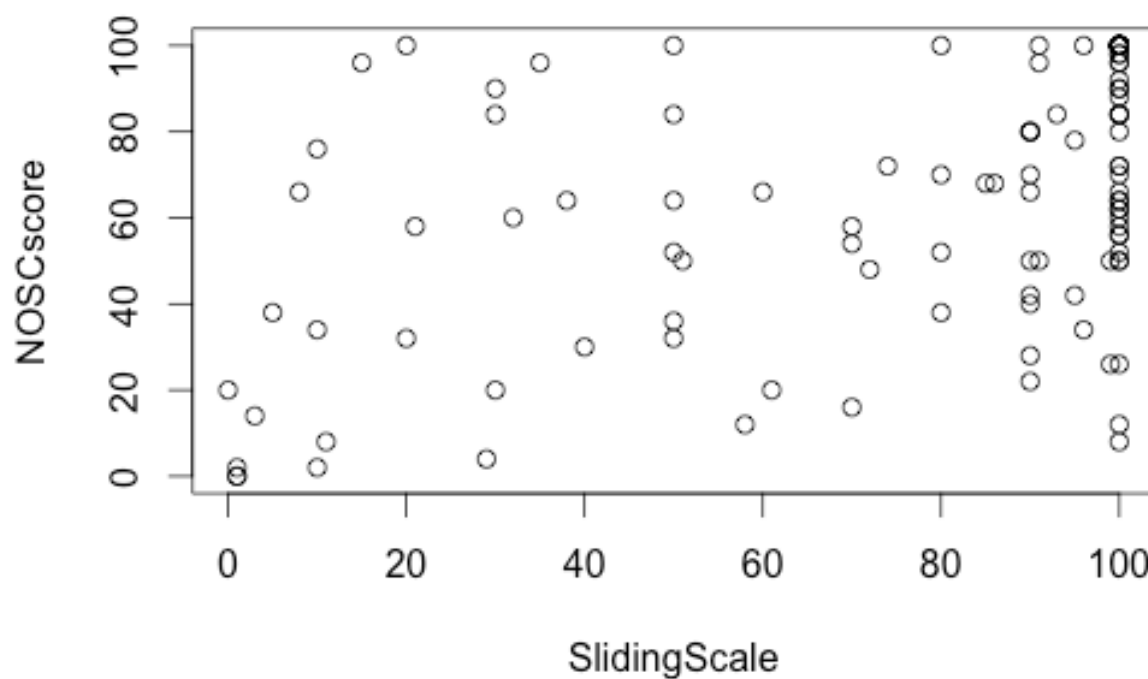


Figure 5b. Scatter plot of sliding scale and Nebraska Outness Scale – Concealment subscale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

Figures 3-5 show scatter plots of comparisons between participants' self-estimated sliding scale scores and their full-scale NOS scores, their NOS-D scores, and their NOS-C scores, respectively. Like on the OI, participants tended to score lower on the NOS-D than their self-estimated sliding scale scores. Participants' possible explanations for this echoed those they gave for the differences between their sliding scale score and their OI score (e.g., talking about sexual orientation was overemphasized, the scale included social groups the participants did not include in their estimation of their own outness, etc.).

When comparing sliding scale scores with scores on the NOS-C, however, no specific pattern emerged. Recall that NOS-C scores were reversed such that higher scores correspond to less concealment—and greater outness. Some participants scored lower on the NOS-C than their sliding scale scores, some scored higher on the NOS-C than their sliding scale scores, and some scored similarly on both measures. One possible explanation for this became apparent in some participants' qualitative responses to the NOS. When asked to comment on their experience completing the NOS, some participants wrote what seemed like a further explanation about their responses surrounding the questions about avoidance of talking about sexual orientation. Responses in this category included the following: “I don’t tend to talk about it much period. It’s just one part of who I am” (M, 29, #3); “I don’t always talk about my orientation, but everyone knows what it is” (F, 33, #105); “I don’t really avoid it with my parents but it is just not brought up frequently” (M, 24, #117); “I don’t really avoid it, it is just that I usually don’t have the time to bring it up” (F, 27, #135); and “the scales are easy to complete but over look the fact that unless my orientation is relevant then it is very unlikely to be brought up” (F, 23, #155). Despite stating in their qualitative responses that they did not avoid talking about their sexual orientation, these and other participants with similar comments about the NOS chose answers on the NOS-C

that would suggest that they did avoid talking about sexual orientation to varying extents. It seems as though these participants may have been responding to what they thought the scale was asking (i.e., “How much do you talk about topics related to your sexual orientation when interacting with members of these groups?”), and not to what the scale actually was asking (i.e., “How often do you avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating your sexual orientation (e.g., not talking about your significant other, changing your mannerisms) when interacting with members of these groups?”). These participants’ responses also highlighted that avoidance of talking about or otherwise indicating one’s sexual orientation may not be synonymous with concealing one’s sexual orientation. Participants who provided this type of qualitative response most often obtained lower NOS-C scores than their self-estimated outness scores.

In addition, some participants who did not consider themselves out may have obtained higher scores on the NOS-C (indicating greater outness) because their “less out” status precludes the need to avoid topics relating to their sexual orientation. For example, a bisexual man wrote that a few friends might have suspicions about his sexual orientation, but “I haven’t told them and they haven’t asked” (M, 42, #79). He assigned himself a 15 on the sliding scale and scored a 96 on the NOS-C. For every social group except “People you socialize with” on the NOS, this participant indicated that 0% of the group was aware of his sexual orientation and he never avoids talking about topics relating to his sexual orientation with them. Regarding people he socializes with, he indicated that 30% of them were aware of his sexual orientation and he avoids talking about topics relating to his sexual orientation with them some of the time. He wrote, “I haven’t explicitly told anyone about being with men, but a few close friends pretty much know ... I haven’t told them and they haven’t asked.” This participant’s response pattern seems to

indicate that he believes he only needs to avoid talking about his sexual orientation if it is possible that others might know about it. In a different kind of example, a pansexual woman assigned herself a 20 on the sliding scale and scored a 100 on the NOS-C. She explained, “I don’t AVOID anything, and I have no ‘stereotypical’ mannerisms to change. my spouse is male, so there is really nothing for me to concern myself with” (F, 29, #137). For this woman, marriage to a man contributed both to her lower self-estimated outness score and to her lack of avoidance of talking about her sexual orientation.

Scatter plots showing comparisons between participants’ OI scores and their full-scale NOS scores, their NOS-D scores, and their NOS-C scores (Figures 7-9) can be found in Appendix E.

Comparing scoring methods for the Outness Inventory. As I discussed previously, Mohr’s (2011) guidelines for scoring the Outness Inventory were vague. Recall that the standard method for scoring the OI was to calculate the means of the items associated with each of the three subscales (Out to Family, Out to World, and Out to Religion), and then calculating the average of those three subscales to obtain the overall outness measure. According to Mohr, it also seemed acceptable under some circumstances to obtain the overall outness score by calculating the average of all of the individual items, which was how I scored the measure.

I scored the OI using the standard method for the purpose of comparing that method with the one I had used. See Figure 6 for a scatter plot of the scores using these two methods. The plot shows that, on average, the two methods for scoring resulted in similar scores. In the four instances where the two scores differed substantially (i.e., by more than ten points), the standard scoring method always resulted in the lower outness score. This was particularly notable for a gay man who scored a 17 on the OI using the nonstandard scoring method and a 0 on the OI

using the standard scoring method (M, 31, #158). This participant had indicated that every group either was not relevant to his life or definitely did not know about his sexual orientation status, and it is never talked about, except for his old heterosexual friends, who he indicated definitely did know about his sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about. Because the “old heterosexual friends” item is not included in the standard scoring method, this participant’s score was misleadingly low when this method was used. Mohr did indicate that this item could be included in the overall outness score; however he did not specify whether this item should be grouped into one of the existing subscales, be treated as a standalone score, or be included only if a researcher chose to use the approach I did, calculating the average of the individual items.

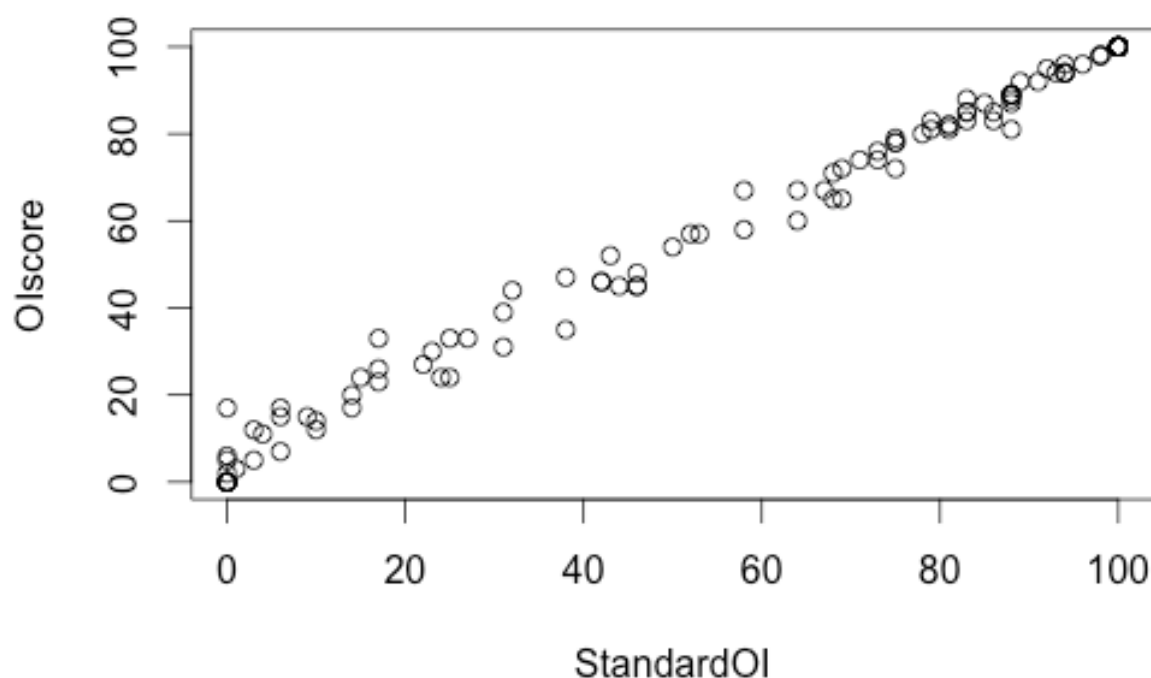


Figure 6. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory scores obtained by calculating the average of all items and Outness Inventory scores obtained using the standard method of calculating the average of the three subscales (Out to Family, Out to World, and Out to Religion).

Mohr (2011) stated that the standard method for scoring the OI avoids the issue of giving less weight to domains associated with fewer scale items, with the implication that this results in a more sensitive measure of outness. However, in each of the four instances where the scores differed by more than ten points, the participants' self-estimated outness scores were higher than both their OI score using the nonstandard scoring method and their OI score using the standard scoring method. In other words, the standard scoring method resulted in OI scores that were even less aligned with these participants' estimates of their own outness than their OI scores using the nonstandard scoring method. This indicates that the author's claim that assigning equal weight to each domain results in a better measure may not be accurate in all cases.

Qualitative Comparisons and Critiques of the Scales

Participants raised several concerns about the scales based on their experiences with completing them. Table 3 shows the themes I identified related to critiques of the outness scales and the number of nonheterosexual men and women who reported each theme.

Table 3

Themes Related to Concerns about the Outness Scales for Nonheterosexual Participants

Themes	Women (<i>n</i> = 62)	Men (<i>n</i> = 60)
Talking about sexual orientation is overemphasized	31 (50%)	23 (38%)
Included social groups are problematic	31 (50%)	13 (22%)
The scales are too simplistic	11 (18%)	10 (17%)
How do I know if others “know” about my sexual orientation?	3 (5%)	8 (13%)
The scales could be prone to being misread	4 (6%)	5 (8%)
Other	11 (18%)	5 (8%)

Note. Table entries are the numbers and percentages of nonheterosexual women and men who reported each theme. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants reported multiple themes.

Talking about sexual orientation is overemphasized. The most common concern that participants expressed about the OI and the NOS is that the scales overemphasized the act of talking about sexual orientation. Recall that the OI, in particular, included response options that mentioned how often or how openly participants’ sexual orientation status is talked about. One bisexual woman who assigned herself an 80 on the sliding scale had this to say about the OI, on which she scored a 60: “The Outness Inventory was way off, but that scale seemed to assume you talk a lot about your preferences to anyone” (F, 25, #153). This kind of reaction to the scales manifested in several different ways across participants.

Many participants stated that their sexual orientation is simply not something they talk about much at all, such as the gay man who wrote, “I don’t tend to talk about it much period. It’s just one part of who I am” (M, 29, #3) and the pansexual man who wrote, “It is only discussed if it needs to be” (M, 21, #167). A lesbian woman wrote, “just because I don’t talk about my orientation all the time, doesn’t mean that people don’t know what I am or where my orientation lies” (F, 33, #105).

Other participants indicated that they tend not to share details of their lives with certain others in general. A gay man wrote, “I am a really private person who doesn’t even like telling co-workers about my movie preferences(horror), so I’m not sure if maybe my score is low because I tend to be private in general” (M, 34, #55). A lesbian woman commented on the OI, writing, “I had trouble with the ‘stranger/new acquaintance’ item because I don’t jump into any sort of personal conversation very readily” (F, 58, #114). A bisexual woman wrote, “I don’t really open up to people until I’ve known them for quite a bit (years)” (F, 33, #191).

Confounding unwillingness to talk about sexual orientation with unwillingness to share any personal information at all could be problematic when trying to assess outness.

Some participants reported that the relationships they have with those around them do not warrant frequent discussions about their sexual orientation. A bisexual man wrote, “I live away from family so no need to bring it up but if asked would be honest” (M, 35, #41), and a gay man wrote, “I don’t really avoid it with my parents but it is just not brought up frequently” (M, 24, #117). Another gay man wrote, “some of the people that I work with at my office don’t know. It’s not that I choose not to tell them however, it is more so that the topic never comes up as we are busy with work” (M, 29, #148). A lesbian woman wrote, “most people know what my sexual preference is. The ones who do not are just not that close to me and it is not relevant to

bring it up just for the sake of them knowing” (F, 26, #152). A bisexual woman criticized the OI, writing, “I feel that this scale while easy to complete is not a very in-depth explanation. For most of these categories my orientation is in no way relevant and thus not discussed” (F, 23, #155). This participant had similar feedback after completing the NOS.

Still other participants seemed to suggest that talking about sexual orientation to the extent the scales emphasized would be inappropriate, such as the gay man who wrote that he does not “run around proclaiming it or shoving it in people’s faces” (M, 24, #5). Another gay man wrote, “I am not going to randomly go up to strangers and blurt out my sexuality. Does anyone do that?” (M, 30, #78). A lesbian woman wrote that her OI score (72) might have been lower than her self-estimated outness score (95) because “I don’t make it a point to be flamboyant or militant in any way” (F, 47, #136).

A pansexual man expressed anger with the survey, expressing his belief that the scales assumed that significant differences exist between heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals with regard to talking about sex and sexual orientation. He wrote, “We’re just normal people with normal conversations. If sex comes up, then it comes up, but it’s not a constant discussion, or something we’d discuss in front of strangers or business clients” (M, 30, #46). Although outness is often conceptualized as something that must be communicated to others, it may not be useful to assume that talking about sexual orientation characterizes outness.

Included social groups are problematic. Another common set of concerns participants had about the OI and the NOS was that the scales included social groups that were not important to them or that the scales did not include social groups that were important to them.

The more common of these concerns was that the scales included social groups that were not important to the participants. One gay man explained why he thought his self-estimated

outness score (90) was higher than his scores on the OI (58) and the NOS (45), writing, “This survey takes into account strangers, co-workers, and people of that nature. When I think of being out or not, my definition includes less people than this survey did” (M, 29, #3). A bisexual man explained that his self-rated outness score (72) differed from his scores on the OI (31) and the NOS (36) “because I was counting my /small/ group, not everyone” (M, 24, #49).

The inclusion of strangers on the scales was the most commonly contested social group among our participants. A bisexual man speculated that his self-estimated outness score (85) differed from his OI (74) and NOS (67) scores because of “the effect and importance placed on strangers. I don’t generally meet and talk about personal matters to strangers so for me, it’s less important” (M, 38, #185). A lesbian woman wrote, “I didn’t take into account strangers when I rated myself. I don’t consider people I just meet or briefly have an encounter with to be a part of my life” (F, 41, #201). A pansexual man advised, “complete strangers shouldn’t even be taken into account in the measurements” (M, 30, #46), and a queer woman wrote, “It’s silly to say someone isn’t 100% out because strangers at the store don’t know they’re gay” (F, 24, #21).

Other participants mentioned that their circumstances rendered some social groups unimportant to them. This was particularly problematic on the NOS, which does not include a “not applicable” option like the OI does. After completing the NOS, one gay man explained that,

I gave my extended family a higher score in the first part of the survey [the OI, where the “highest” score is “N/A”] because I don’t really know my extended family ... I have not seen most of them before I was eighteen. I came out at eighteen, so my extended family would have no idea (M, 30, #78).

Two lesbian women echoed this sentiment, writing, “I don’t have a relationship with extended family so they don’t really get to know” (F, 28, #126), and, “Just wanted to note that I don’t have much contact with my extended family at all” (F, 34, #13). A pansexual woman (F, 27, #90) and a bisexual woman (F, 22, #87) mentioned a similar concern about two of the items on the NOS (“People at your work/school (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)”) because they were not attending work or school.

In one case, a pansexual man stated that the OI and the NOS were difficult for him to respond to because he did not consider himself the “typical respondent” given that “there’s no one for me to be ‘out’ to” (M, 30, #67). He rated himself a 10 on the sliding scale but scored a 0 on the OI and a 38 on the NOS. His response pattern on the NOS-C showed that he indicated that he never avoids talking about his sexual orientation with immediate family, extended family, and friends—the groups the participant mentioned not having in his life. Like some of the participants described above who scored higher on the NOS-C than their self-estimated outness scores, it seems he reasoned that if these social groups are not applicable to his life, then he does not technically avoid talking about his sexual orientation with them. However, this interpretation of the scale resulted in an outness score with which the participant did not feel aligned.

A few participants stated that the scales did not include social groups that were important to them. A bisexual man who assigned himself a 30 on the sliding scale speculated that his OI score of 0 seemed inaccurate because “it does not include any of my online friends,” the only social group to which he reported being out (M, 18, #92). A lesbian woman mentioned that the scales did not include her students, who she considered a relevant social group in her life when considering her outness (F, 41, #201).

Some nonmonosexual participants mentioned being out to their sexual and romantic partners, a group that is not included on either the OI or the NOS. A bisexual man who indicated that he did not consider himself out wrote, “only my wife and the men I’ve been with know” (M, 37, #121), and another wrote, “only my wife and I know (we’re in an open marriage) ... it only matters to me and whatever sexual partners I have” (M, 23, #132). A pansexual woman cited her husband as one of the few people who know about her sexual orientation (F, 29, #137), and a bisexual woman indicated that her romantic partners were the only ones who know about her sexual orientation (F, 24, #83). A bisexual woman explicitly criticized the scales, writing, “There was no space for a significant other ... The scale was easy to use but I believe more categories are needed” (F, 32, #202). These responses suggest that the OI and the NOS were not necessarily developed with nonmonosexual individuals’ experiences in mind. This is problematic because the assumption that nonheterosexual individuals’ sexual orientations are obvious to their partners contributes to the marginalization of nonmonosexual identities.

The scales are too simplistic. Several participants indicated that they found the OI and/or the NOS too simplistic, either by not providing response options that matched their experience or by not providing an opportunity for more complex responses. A gay man stated that he believed his sliding scale score (100) was different from his scores on the OI (78) and the NOS (86) because “they don’t allow nuanced and complex responses to their measurements” (M, 24, #5). Another gay man criticized the scales, writing, “I think the scores are based on too little information” (M, 34, #109) and suggesting that the measures should ask more open-ended questions. A lesbian woman struggled to express her thoughts about whether she believed her OI score was accurate, writing, “it’s really hard for me to say because it’s hard to explain without knowing my living situation and my life situation” (F, 28, #126).

Some participants described having difficulty with the scales' use of social groups rather than individuals. Of the OI, a bisexual woman wrote, "I had trouble with the last item on the list (My old heterosexual friends) because some of them rate 1 or 2 and some rate 7," and, of the NOS, she wrote, "It's difficult to rate groups because different individuals within a group may need different ratings" (F, 34, #124). A lesbian woman had the same difficulty rating her work peers on the OI. She wrote, "Some of my work peers know and we openly talk about it. With other work peers they know, or I assume they know and it is occasionally talked about" (F, 41, #201).

For some participants who do not consider themselves out, the NOS was difficult to complete. A bisexual woman, who indicated that she does not consider herself out, suggested that the NOS-D's response options did not quite align with her experiences. She wrote, "I think it is a little difficult to narrow down the percentage of people who may be aware of my orientation. For me, 10% seems too high" (F, 28, #188). Similarly, a bisexual man, who indicated that he does not consider himself out, wrote of the NOS, "I feel like this scale doesn't fit my situation very well," and speculated that his score on the NOS was too high because "that scale went immediately from 0% to 10% and was a bit less specific" (M, 23, #132).

Other participants reported having idiosyncratic experiences related to their outness that the scales could not capture. For instance, when responding to the NOS, a pansexual man wrote, "My parents had their suspicions a few years ago and outed me. They gave me an ultimatum to be 'straight' so to them I am 'straight' and it has not been discussed since" (M, 22, #18). Participants who had complex experiences regarding outness, such as this one, may find it difficult to assign ratings to relevant individuals and groups.

How do I know if others “know” about my sexual orientation? A small number of participants wrote that it was difficult to respond to some of the items on the scales because those items relied on their accurate appraisal of who knows about their sexual orientation. After completing the OI, one gay man commented, “It is kind of hard to rate because I think they know, but I am not sure” (M, 31, #91), and another commented, “It’s kind of hard to guess for strangers or people I don’t know that well in my church, but I gave what I think are generally true answers” (M, 22, #131). After completing the NOS, a lesbian woman commented, “50% for people in the grocery store might be high but I don’t know what’s in people’s heads” (F, 36, #53). Especially in situations where nonverbal communication of sexual orientation may predominate over verbal communication, it can be difficult for nonheterosexual individuals to be sure that others are aware of their sexual orientation, which could in turn affect how they respond to scale items related to this issue.

The scales could be prone to being misread. Finally, as described above, a few participants seemed to have misread the scales in ways that significantly affected the scores they received. There were two primary ways in which this happened.

Some participants who assigned themselves either 100s or 0s on the sliding scale scored 50s on the Nebraska Outness Scale (M, 30, #102; M, 23, #125; F, 35, #138). Their individual response patterns showed that the self-rated “100” participants had chosen only the rightmost items on the NOS, and the self-rated “0” participants had chosen only the leftmost items on the NOS. Because the NOS-D and the NOS-C are formatted such that, on the NOS-D, response options indicate greater outness from left to right, and, on the NOS-C, response options indicate less outness from left to right, this response pattern would result in a score of 50. It seems likely

that these participants assumed that the rightmost column indicated the most outness, and the leftmost column indicated the least outness.

Some participants seemed to have misread the scales in ways that were more idiosyncratic. Two participants indicated that most of the groups included on the OI “definitely does not know” about their sexual orientation status despite assigning themselves 100s on the sliding scale and stating in their open-ended responses that they are very open with friends and family about their sexual orientation (M, 24, #161; F, 28, #199). It is unclear in what way these participants may have misread the scale. One participant stated in an open-ended response that she indicated on the OI that her father “definitely does not know” about her sexual orientation because he is not in her life (F, 23, #127). She assigned herself a 100 on the sliding scale, but because she chose the “definitely does not know” option rather than N/A, her OI score (91) was lowered. It is certainly possible that other participants may have similarly overlooked this option but did not include comments that alerted me to their error.

Although misreading the scales was not a widespread problem in my sample, some participants seemed to have done so in a way that was related to how the scales are formatted. Researchers who use these scales should be aware of this possibility. The six participants described above were excluded from quantitative analyses.

Measuring Outness

Can outness be measured? To assess their beliefs about whether outness can be measured accurately, participants were asked, “In general, do you think that someone’s outness about their sexual orientation status can be measured accurately? Why or why not?” I coded participants’ responses into the following three categories. The majority of nonheterosexual participants (55%) stated that they believed outness is too complex, or too individually variable,

to be measured well. Fewer stated that they believed outness could be measured in some situations (23%), and fewer still stated that they believed outness is easy to measure (15%; see Table 4).

Table 4

Participants' Beliefs About Whether Outness Can be Measured Accurately: Numbers and Percentages of Nonheterosexual and Heterosexual Participants Who Reported Different Beliefs

Belief	<i>Nonheterosexual Participants (n = 122)</i>	<i>Heterosexual Participants (n = 48)</i>
Outness is too complex to be measured accurately	67 (55%)	26 (54%)
Outness can be measured accurately in some circumstances	28 (23%)	14 (29%)
Outness is easily measured accurately	18 (15%)	7 (15%)

Note. The table shows the numbers and percentages of nonheterosexual and heterosexual participants in the complete sample who reported each belief about measuring outness.

Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants did not respond to this question or stated that they were unsure of their beliefs about measuring outness. Similar proportions of nonheterosexual and heterosexual participants mentioned each theme, $\chi^2(3) = 2.18, p = .535$.

Many participants who did not think outness could be measured accurately cited reasons such as, “there are too many nuances in outness” (F, 34, #13); “everyone has different ideas of what constitutes being out” (F, 29, #52); “I think that the concept is too vague to be measured accurately. Different people would gauge it differently” (M, 34, #109); and “I think its a little

hard. Its almost impossible to take all the different factors into account” (M, 29, #93). These examples are reflective of the widespread idea that outness is too variable across individuals to measure well. Other participants mentioned the idea that outness is difficult to measure because it is not necessarily a stable trait, such as the gay man who wrote, “No. I think some people vary depending on the circumstance” (M, 27, #27). Some participants expressed discomfort with the idea of attempting to measure outness, such as the bisexual man who wrote, “No, impossible to quantify. Only exists qualitatively within one’s mind. This is a futile concept to deconstruct. It feels inhuman to do so” (M, 20, #143) and the gay man who wrote, “I think it could be harmful to people’s self-identity of gender to try to put a numerical label on how ‘out’ they are” (M, 22, #131).

Even participants who indicated that they thought outness could be measured under some circumstances often mentioned that the subjective and fluid nature of outness might present a barrier to its measurement. A bisexual woman wrote, “I think it can be measured, but just like everything else it is subject to bias” (F, 26, #159), and a gay man wrote that he thought outness could be measured “to a certain extent, but there is always the fact that in different situations, people act and feel differently” (M, 39, #120). A lesbian woman indicated that she thought outness can be measured, but “the measurement needs to be determined by the person that’s out. I’m not sure an outside observer can do it” (F, 36, #53). Other participants suggested that inaccurate reporting by respondents might threaten the accuracy of outness measures, such as the bisexual woman who wrote, “I think a person’s level of of outness can be measured accurately if they answer accurately when it comes to their behavior” (F, 54, #16).

Most participants who reported believing that outness is easy to measure stated that they viewed outness as a black and white construct—one is either out or not out. For example, a lesbian woman wrote,

I think someone's outness status can be measured rather accurately. ... if you are out you are out and if you are still in the closet, then you are still in the closet. It is black and white to me (F, 48, #129).

A gay man wrote, "its black and white. it needs no measuring" (M, 25, #106), and a bisexual man wrote, "I think it can be measured. Because it's either you are, or you aren't" (M, 35, #165). A few participants in this category simply mentioned their belief that, even if outness is not black and white, the process for measuring it is straightforward. One gay man wrote that outness is "easily measured by finding out if the people close to them know about their sexual orientation or not," (M, 24, #50) and a lesbian woman wrote, "it's easy to ask whether people tell others they are gay" (F, 28, #199).

What is a good measure of outness? Regardless of their beliefs about whether outness could be measured accurately, participants nonetheless offered numerous suggestions for what a good measure might look like.

The most commonly mentioned suggestion for creating a good measure of outness among nonheterosexual participants was to weight different relationships according to how important they are to the respondent. A bisexual man wrote that a good measure of outness would include "TIME SPENT and INTIMACY WITH each group to whom one might tell another about his/her sexual orientation" (M, 20, #143), and a lesbian woman wrote that a good measure would include "how much weight I give to the people who do know as part of my life" (F, 36, #118). A gay man criticized the OI and NOS, writing, "I consider friends and acquaintances to mean more

than family, whereas the system that ranked me did not” (M, 30, #72). These responses suggest that outness scales that assign equal weight to various social groups may be missing important information about respondents’ experiences of outness.

Nonheterosexual participants had other suggestions for creating a good measure of outness. These included accounting for personality traits, nonverbal methods of communicating outness, and respondents’ concerns about being out. A woman with fluid sexual orientation wrote that she believes a good outness measure “could begin with asking is someone is an introvert or an extrovert. ... Irregardless of sexuality, some people are more or less comfortable sharing information about themselves” (F, 39, #130). One gay man wrote, “attending events that support the gay lifestyle are also things to consider when someone is out” (M, 30, #78), and a pansexual woman wrote that a good outness measure would account for “Facebook status and participation in out events like Pride” (F, 28, #154). A lesbian woman wrote that a good outness measure would account for “if the person has no reservations in telling people their sexual orientation. No fear to be outed or be out” (F, 36, #53). Other suggestions included that a good outness measure would allow for open-ended responses (e.g., M, 24, #5; F, 29, #137), would account for how “easy” it is to be out given the respondent’s geographic location (M, 35, #41), or would take into account the respondent’s personal definition of outness (e.g., F, 27, #90; M, 30, #102; F, 30, #116; M, 22, #131).

As the previous examples suggest, most participants’ suggestions for good outness measures are not necessarily compatible with approaches that attempt to quantify outness using a single number. These participants emphasized the individualized nature of outness, communicating that, to them, outness is multifaceted and different for everyone.

Culture and Outness

Some nonwhite participants mentioned some ways in which their culture influenced their experiences of outness. A lesbian woman who identified as “Asian American/Asian” wrote about hiding her sexual orientation from her mother. She wrote,

I don’t think I am completely out because one person that does not know is my mom. It’s hard to have this topic in our family due to cultural issues. I know she knows that I am and my sister is also gay. I just don’t want to disappoint my mom knowing she has two gay daughters. ... she totally knows but due to the cultural reasoning, it’s something that cannot be talked about (F, 31, #144).

A bisexual woman who also identified as “Asian American/Asian” described a similar situation. She wrote, “Due to my ethnicity and my culture’s perspective on sexuality, I cannot consciously be “out” about my sexual orientation. It simply is not accepted/frowned upon” (F, 22, #184).

Although these were the only two participants who wrote about the interaction between their own outness and their culture, it is reasonable to assume that other nonwhite participants may have had similar experiences, even if they did not write about them in this survey. Indeed, a gay man who identified as “Hispanic American/Latina/Latino” suggested that, although he experienced a supportive environment in which to express his outness, this might not be the case for everyone. He wrote, “Not everyone has the same support or culture. Some cultures will kill you if you are openly gay” (M, 44, #150).

Heterosexual Participants

The survey was administered to a small number of heterosexual participants to explore whether and how heterosexual individuals relate to outness about their sexual orientation.

Describing and estimating outness. When estimating their own outness, the majority of heterosexual participants (73%) assigned themselves 100s on the sliding scale. Several of these

participants wrote that they consider themselves fully out because they believe those around them always correctly assume that they are heterosexual. For example, one heterosexual man wrote, “It really isn’t that hard to be out when you are straight because it is the assumed default position” (M, 37, #4). Another wrote, “I guess hetero is the default, so I suppose that I was born ‘out’” (M, 34, #59). A heterosexual woman wrote, “To be honest I’m not sure there is an ‘out’ when it comes to being straight. Everyone automatically assume you are straight and there isn’t a need to come out and say you are straight” (F, 31, #2). Despite stating her belief that there is no “out” for heterosexual individuals, this participant nevertheless assigned herself a 100 on the sliding scale.

Some heterosexual participants who assigned themselves 0s on the sliding scale expressed a belief that being out means being publically LGBTQ. For example, one heterosexual woman explained, “I am not out and open about my sexual orientation. I have always been heterosexual and it has never changed” (F, 28, #12). Another simply wrote, “I’m not out because I’m straight” (F, 33, #43). A heterosexual man wrote, “I chose 0 because i’m positively straight” (M, 58, #147). All of these responses either explicitly state or imply that outness is not relevant to heterosexual individuals. A few participants even mentioned double-checking to make sure the survey was really intended for heterosexual participants (e.g., F, 31, #2; F, 48, #47).

Some participants wrote that because they are heterosexual—the sexual orientation of the majority of the population—there is no need to hide it. For example, one heterosexual woman wrote,

I’ve never hidden my sexual orientation, and it’s never been a problem, given that my sexual orientation is the one that is currently the most common in the population. It’s not likely that one would ever be discriminated again for being heterosexual (F, 56, #22).

Another wrote, “I’m straight so I had nothing to hide in the first place. I would think that someone who wasn’t heterosexual might need more effort to consider themselves to be out” (F, 22, #60). Like the participants who mentioned assumed heterosexuality, these participants seemed to imply that they believed outness is less relevant to heterosexual individuals than to nonheterosexual individuals because heterosexual individuals have the privilege of not needing to hide their sexual orientation.

In contrast to the participants who acknowledged their heterosexual privilege, one heterosexual man seemed to be angry because he perceived that my questionnaire challenged his heterosexual privilege. He wrote,

Why would a heterosexual person be compelled to hide their preference? Are we really to the point where anyone could possibly believe that a heterosexual person ‘should’ or would want to hide their preference? Equal rights for homosexuals is one thing, but these kinds of questions might make one wonder if some people think being heterosexual is something that should be kept in ‘the closet.’ I know being gay is very ‘cool’ these days, but suggesting—ever so subtly—that a heterosexual person should hide their orientation is ludicrous (M, 57, #15).

Some heterosexual participants who assigned themselves 100s on the sliding scale described conceptualizations of outness that included openly expressing and/or not hiding one’s sexual orientation, similar to conceptualizations offered by nonheterosexual participants. Examples of heterosexual participants’ definitions of outness included, “being honest about it and not denying myself” (F, 32, #31); “living life and engaging in relationship and romance without lying to others or hiding it from anyone” (F, 28, #97); “having people in your life know

your orientation if you want them to” (M, 34, #59); and “not hiding your true sexual identity from people that you know” (M, 30, #81).

Some heterosexual participants who assigned themselves something other than 100 on the sliding scale had rationales for doing so that echoed some nonheterosexual participants’ explanations in other ways. For example, a heterosexual man who assigned himself a 75 on the sliding scale explained, “I didn’t rate it ‘100’ because I don’t know if strangers could tell my sexual preferences from my appearance alone” (M, 29, #19). Similarly, a heterosexual woman explained her sliding scale score of 95, writing, “I don’t go around saying to people ‘hey I’m straight’ but I don’t hide who I am or who I am attracted to” (F, 43, #33). These responses are reminiscent of nonheterosexual participants who expressed that, for them, outness does not rely on verbalizing their sexual orientation in every situation or on strangers’ knowledge of their sexual orientation.

There were a few heterosexual participants who seemed to be unsure about what outness was or who seemed to understand outness differently from the way most nonheterosexual participants did. For example, a heterosexual man wrote that his definition of outness is “openly discussing sexual activities or preferences with other people” (M, 33, #28). He assigned himself a 0 on the sliding scale because he does not do this. Other descriptions of outness included “being curious about another sex I would guess” (M, 31, #45) and “not knowing how u feel about your gender” (M, 58, #147). It seems that some heterosexual individuals are simply unfamiliar with the concept of outness as it is commonly understood among nonheterosexual individuals, which may be related to the belief that some heterosexual individuals hold that outness is less relevant to them.

Finally, one man who identified as heterosexual described a complex situation regarding his own outness. This man explained, “I am attracted to men, but I consider myself heterosexual because I have not acted on it out of fear of being cut off from my family and friends” (M, 28, #30). This participant assigned himself a 3 on the sliding scale, but that number seemed to reference his outness about his attraction to men, not about his self-identified heterosexual orientation. In addition to this participant’s experiences contributing to his difficulty describing his sexual orientation and his outness, his presence in my data highlights a potential problem for any study that focuses on outness. That is, potential participants who are not out may not volunteer for studies that are recruiting nonheterosexual participants.

Can outness be measured? When asked whether they thought outness could be measured accurately, heterosexual participants’ response pattern closely mirrored that of nonheterosexual participants. The majority stated that they believed outness is too complex to be measured well (54%), with fewer stating that outness can be measured under some circumstances (29%), and even fewer stating that outness is easily measurable (15%; see Table 3). A chi-square test of independence indicated that, indeed, there were no significant differences between the frequencies of nonheterosexual and heterosexual participants’ responses to this question, $\chi^2(3) = 2.18, p = .535$. Interestingly, several heterosexual participants mentioned the idea that outness could be fluid, changing across time and across environments, a theme that was mentioned by only a few nonheterosexual participants. For example, when asked if he believed outness could be measured accurately, a heterosexual man wrote, “I’m not sure because people tend to change at various stages of their lives and certain feelings towards people (negative or positive) may have some effect on the score at any given moment” (M, 44, #35). Another wrote, simply, “No, because it can fluctuate” (M, 30, #101). A heterosexual woman wrote, “I don’t

necessarily think it can be measured accurately because it is constantly changing. Your outness can, in some ways, change with your mood. It can change in different surroundings and with different groups of people” (F, 28, #97).

In contrast to the heterosexual participants who described outness as complex and fluid, a few described a belief that outness is “black and white” and therefore easy to measure. This belief also echoed some nonheterosexual participants’ responses. One heterosexual man expressed irritation at the idea of measuring outness. He wrote, “I think creating an ‘outness’ scale or scales is a ridiculous waste of money and time by academics. I believe someone is either ‘out’ or they are not, and it’s folly to analyze something like to this level” (M, 57, #15).

Discussion

This study was an investigation of how participants conceptualize outness and how well those conceptualizations align with preexisting researcher-developed measures of outness. Most studies involving measures of outness have relied on assumptions about outness that may not be applicable to all participants. Asking participants to describe their own conceptualizations of outness and to respond to some of these preexisting outness measures allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how outness operates in people’s lives.

Conceptualizing Outness

One purpose of this study was to explore how individuals, particularly nonheterosexual individuals, conceptualize outness about sexual orientation. Many participants mentioned conceptualizations of outness that seemed to align well with most colloquial and academic understandings of outness. These conceptualizations generally involved letting others know about their sexual orientation. Participants described multiple ways of letting others know their sexual orientation, including disclosing their sexual orientation verbally, mentioning their

partner, attending Pride events, wearing rainbow accessories, and posting their sexual orientation or relationship status on social media, among others.

There were some differences among participants' conceptualizations of outness as well. For some, outness involved making everyone around them aware of their sexual orientation. For others, it involved openly responding to questions about their sexual orientation without providing unsolicited information about their sexual orientation. Other participants conceptualized outness as not hiding their sexual orientation, but only disclosing it to certain groups of people in certain situations. Often, for these participants, disclosing their sexual orientation within closer relationships was more important to whether they considered themselves out than disclosing their sexual orientation within more casual relationships. For some nonheterosexual participants, being out meant revealing their sexual orientation in the same way heterosexual individuals reveal their sexual orientation: not hiding or announcing it, but discussing their sexual orientation or their partner as those topics are relevant.

The conceptualizations of outness these participants provided present several issues related to assessing whether or not an individual is "out." For instance, some individuals might consider themselves out because they *would* inform others of their sexual orientation if asked, whereas others might consider themselves out only if they *already have* informed others of their sexual orientation. In another example, some individuals might consider themselves out only if their family is aware of their sexual orientation, while other individuals might not consider their family's knowledge of their sexual orientation important to their outness at all.

In addition to considering *whether* they have disclosed their sexual orientation and *to whom* they have disclosed it, as my participants did, individuals might also consider *what* they have disclosed when assessing their own outness. For example, if a bisexual man's friends and

family know he has a same-sex partner, they would know he is nonheterosexual, but they might not know he is bisexual. Would he consider himself out? It is likely that the answer would vary across individuals. Also, an individual's sexual orientation could be conceptualized as more complex than the sex or gender of those to whom they are sexually attracted, which would necessitate a more complex conceptualization of outness for that individual. For instance, if someone is sexually attracted to people of one sex and emotionally attracted to people of the other, what is their sexual orientation, and what would others need to know for that individual to consider themselves out? Sexual orientation could also be conceptualized to include sexual attraction to objects (e.g., underwear, buildings), interest in BDSM, or being asexual, among a myriad of others. Would individuals who identify with these characteristics need to disclose them to others in order to consider themselves out? Again, the answers to these questions are likely not straightforward.

The variety of ways in which participants in my sample conceptualized outness, in addition to the additional possibilities for conceptualizing outness I outlined above, highlighted the complexity and subjectivity inherent in assessing outness. My findings suggest that current practices for measuring outness utilize oversimplified conceptualizations of outness. Consideration of this oversimplification must be balanced with devising practical methods for measuring identity-related constructs when evaluating tools created for the purpose of measuring outness, such as those used in this study.

Comparing and Critiquing the Scales

The potential for mismatch among various academic and personal conceptualizations of outness was evidenced in my participants' scores on the outness measures I administered. Although the OI and the NOS closely approximated some participants' self-estimated outness

scores, other participants found their scores on the scales unsatisfactory. As described above, most participants mentioned one or both of the two primary components of the OI and the NOS in their open-ended responses: disclosure or concealment of sexual orientation and considerations about who knows about their sexual orientation. However, these components operated in more complex ways for some participants than the scales were able to capture.

Many participants mentioned that the scales overemphasized “talking” about sexual orientation as a measure of outness. This emphasis did not provide space for participants who used other strategies for demonstrating their sexual orientation, especially those who relied on nonverbal strategies, to account for those methods. Recall that the response options on the OI asked participants to assess how often or how openly their sexual orientation status was talked about with the individuals and groups the scale included (see Appendix D). For these items, it is difficult to know what exactly counts as “talking about sexual orientation status.” Some participants may have counted mentioning a same-gender partner in conversation, attending Pride events, or listing their sexual orientation on social media as “talking about sexual orientation status,” whereas others may have approached this concept more literally, only counting instances in which their sexual orientation identity was or is the focus of conversation.

In addition, the scales did not take participants’ considerations about social context into account. Recall that the standard scoring method for the OI, which I did not use in this study, called for calculating the average of each of the three subscales (Out to Family, Out to World, and Out to Religion; Mohr, 2011). Although Mohr stated that this approach reduces the problem of giving less weight to domains associated with fewer items on the scale, it nevertheless is based upon the assumption that each of the three domains was equally important to the participant. The scoring method that I used for both the OI and the NOS was to calculate the

average of all of the items on the scale, which was also problematic for many participants based upon their qualitative responses. Many mentioned that certain social groups were unimportant to them, including strangers, coworkers, and even family. By giving equal weight to all social relationships, the OI and the NOS failed to capture the experiences of many of our participants.

The concerns with the OI and the NOS described above call into question the validity of the studies in which these and similar measures are used. Researchers who hope to identify relationships between outness and numerous health-related variables frequently use the OI, in particular. However, if a substantial number of nonheterosexual individuals do not consider talking about their sexual orientation status particularly relevant to their experience of outness, then the OI is not measuring outness for those individuals.

The NOS was created in part as a suggested update to the OI, according to the authors (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). Although it includes separate measures of disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation status, which is a valuable distinction, its operational definitions of disclosure and concealment are too broad, sometimes classifying behaviors as disclosure or concealment of sexual orientation in ways that did not match the participant's experience. This stood out in the way in which concealment was conceptualized on the NOS. Recall that the NOS-C asked participants to indicate how frequently they avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating their sexual orientation. There is, however, some ambiguity about what "avoid" means in this context. Indeed, as I described previously, several participants indicated in their NOS-C item responses that they did avoid talking about sexual orientation to some extent but stated in their qualitative responses that their motivations for this did not include concealing their sexual orientation. In general, participants described many reasons for not talking about sexual orientation, including wanting to conceal their sexual

orientation, not believing such a conversation is appropriate for all contexts (e.g., at work), wanting to mention sexual orientation only in contexts where heterosexual individuals would do so, and simply not finding it relevant to discuss their sexual orientation with those in their lives who are already aware of it, among others. My findings suggest that avoiding talking about or otherwise indicating sexual orientation and concealing sexual orientation may not be synonymous for everyone.

In addition, recall the low correlation between participants' self-estimated sliding scale scores and the NOS-C. This finding also suggests that conceptualizing concealment of sexual orientation as synonymous with avoidance of talking about or otherwise indicating sexual orientation may not be useful. Slepian, Chun, and Mason (2017) found that the frequency with which participants' minds wandered to their secrets was related to variations in well-being, but the actual act of concealing information during a social interaction was not. They concluded that secrecy might be better conceptualized as *having* a secret (which does not necessitate actively concealing information), rather than as *keeping* a secret (which implies actively concealing information). This theory can be easily applied to secrecy about sexual orientation in that nonheterosexual individuals who are not out may be more burdened by the knowledge that certain others do not know their sexual orientation than they are by the act of withholding that information from those others, in part because the need to actively withhold information may not present itself very frequently. Indeed, several of our participants' qualitative responses supported this idea. The NOS-C does not measure participants' distress regarding concealment of their sexual orientation, making it difficult to draw conclusions about how respondents' scores might relate to Slepian et al.'s (2017) theory. By the same token, the subscale does appear to

overlook some important aspects of secrecy about sexual orientation, which may have contributed to its low correlation with participants' self-estimated sliding scale scores.

If the OI and the NOS do not measure outness as nonheterosexual respondents experience it, interpreting the findings in studies that include these measures to investigate the relationships among outness and mental health, physical health, and relationship quality/satisfaction variables is difficult. Although the research in these areas is often intended in part to inform clinical practice involving work with nonheterosexual individuals, meaningful conclusions are difficult to draw from the available literature. Therefore, it could be problematic to assume that outness is causally related to health "outcomes." Research on these relationships often implies that greater or less outness "leads to" better or worse mental health, for example; an assumption that could cause distress or confusion in LGBTQ individuals who are struggling with issues related to both outness and mental health.

Measuring Outness: Possible Approaches

The majority of participants reported believing that outness is difficult or even impossible to measure accurately. Indeed, a substantial portion of my sample did not believe the OI and NOS adequately assessed their outness. These findings highlighted an important consideration regarding measuring aspects of identity; namely, researchers must often be willing to accept a certain amount of error in any attempt to quantify a subjective experience.

Participants' reactions to the idea of measuring outness in general varied widely. Several participants seemed to dismiss the thought of treating outness as a measurable construct (e.g., "It is a non-existent thing. The measure of someone being out is like the measure of someone liking cookies. It's difficult and doesn't matter fully," F, 25, #134). Others reacted to their OI and NOS scores as though the scores revealed some truth about the participant that had been previously

unknown to them (e.g., “I may have overestimated my rated outness as I wasn’t sure of how out I was until actually thinking about who knows about me, so I think that’s why the last score [the self-rated sliding scale score] is highest” M, 22, #18). This range of reactions itself is indicative of the ways in which individuals interact uniquely with their experiences of outness in ways that may not be easily measured.

The problem of measuring aspects of identity has been investigated in realms related to outness. Researchers have found that two measures of sexual orientation (i.e., the Kinsey Scale and the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid) may not adequately account for a wide variety of sexual minority experiences (Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, Gryniewicz, & Davis, 2014). Their participants had many criticisms of the Kinsey Scale and the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid that paralleled the criticisms our participants had of the OI and the NOS. These criticisms included that the Kinsey Scale was too simple, that neither of the scales accounted for the fluidity of sexual orientation, and that both of the scales treated some concepts as dichotomous that participants did not experience that way.

Some of Galupo, Mitchell, et al.’s (2014) participants criticized the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid for its complexity, one saying that the scale was “too complicated to be clear” (p. 413). This comment is particularly interesting because it alludes to a problem inherent in any endeavor to quantitatively capture some aspect of human experience. Researchers interested in measuring a construct must strike a balance between capturing respondents’ experiences reasonably accurately and creating a measure that is not too complex to be meaningfully interpreted. Measures of outness will likely always be imperfect; however, outness is likely worth measuring nonetheless. It is important to consider whether existing outness measures can be improved upon with this balance in mind.

Measuring Outness: Nonmonosexual Individuals

A few nonmonosexual participants expressed the idea that outness for them is more complex than, or at least different from, outness for monosexual individuals. A bisexual woman explained, “Things get trickier when you’re talking bisexual [versus] complete homosexual or heterosexual, in those instances you are only interested in ONE gender/sex. Being bisexual – I like TWO TYPES, not just one. It’s more complex in that sense” (F, 30, #116). Another bisexual woman wrote:

Sexuality can’t be measured accurately because there is no label for how people feel about other people, not really. Like there is no, 60/40 bisexual or anything like that, even if you feel you are more attracted to one sex than another, even if you like both evenly you might still have a preference and labels don’t really take that into account (F, 24, #85).

Nonmonosexual participants mentioned several circumstances that complicate outness for them. In some cases, being in a relationship with an other-gender partner resulted in others assuming the participant was heterosexual. In other cases, it is likely that being in a relationship with a same-gender partner may result in others assuming an individual is nonheterosexual, although none of my participants mentioned this. Indeed, many participants (monosexual and nonmonosexual alike) seemed to equate talking about their relationships with talking about their sexual orientation. This practice is not straightforward for nonmonosexual individuals, whose sexual orientations are not necessarily apparent based upon the gender of their current partner.

In other cases, being in a relationship with an other-gender partner resulted in the participant needing to come out to that partner (e.g., “some people didn’t support me such as my partner who is male he was upset because we have 2 children together;” F, 23, #127). Although

this did not occur in my sample, it is reasonable to assume that coming out as nonmonosexual to a same-gender partner could be equally significant, given the stigma around nonmonosexuality even in lesbian and gay communities (Israel & Mohr, 2004; McLean, 2008).

Finally, some nonmonosexual participants described the difficulty of explaining their sexual orientation to others in their lives. For example, a pansexual man wrote:

I openly date a woman who was born as a man. ... If they get to know me, or meet [my partner], they'll know that I am [pansexual]. Or, they'll probably assume that I'm just homosexual, because most people don't understand the various classifications of the LGBTQ community (M, 30, #46).

A pansexual woman shared a similar experience:

My mother has been semi-told (shes nearly 70 so the word pansexual would be meaningless to her, however I told her I would be just as happy with a woman as a man, although this is not what pansexual is, I did not feel it would be helpful to go into the other gender identity possibilities with her) (F, 29, #137).

Research on the measurement of sexual orientation identity has also revealed differing experiences across monosexual and nonmonosexual participants (Galupo, Davis, et al., 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, et al., 2014). In these studies, nonmonosexual participants mentioned the fluidity of their sexual orientations, which also likely complicates outness. For instance, if someone's sexual orientation changes over time one may ask whether they can still be considered out. As with all participants, nonmonosexual participants' conceptualizations of outness likely influenced how they responded to the self-estimated sliding scale, the OI and the NOS. However, some nonmonosexual participants presented situations that were uniquely related to outness about nonmonosexual identities. It is possible that some modifications could

be made to existing outness measures so that they would more closely capture nonmonosexual individuals' experiences of outness. However, the multitude and potential fluidity of nonmonosexual identities may make attempting to quantify outness an even more problematic endeavor for these individuals.

Heterosexual Participants: Compulsory Heterosexuality

Heterosexual participants reported a widespread belief that outness is less relevant for heterosexual individuals than it is for nonheterosexual individuals. In many cases, heterosexual participants indicated that outness was not relevant to them because they are assumed—in their cases, correctly—to be heterosexual, a phenomenon referred to academically as “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980). This assumption precludes heterosexual individuals from needing to navigate informing others of their sexual orientation, an event that is often wrought with emotion and possibly even danger for nonheterosexual individuals. Indeed, some nonheterosexual participants mentioned a desire to behave in ways they believe are expected for heterosexual individuals as indicative of increased outness (e.g., “I wish I could talk more openly about my romantic relationships with casual acquaintances, just like straight people who are unashamed of their orientation can”; M, 29, #14). In addition, several nonmonosexual participants mentioned that compulsory heterosexuality obscures their identities when they are in other-sex relationships (e.g., “Now I am proud of [being bisexual] even though most people wouldn’t know if they looked at my last two relationships”; F, 23, #155). These responses suggest that compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates the need for outness for nonheterosexual individuals as well as contributes to the harmful discourse that heterosexual individuals represent the “norm,” and nonheterosexual individuals represent the “other.”

Limitations and Future Directions

Drawing participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) resulted in a sample that was more diverse in age and race/ethnicity than a college student sample from the University of Kansas would have been; however, the sample was still limited in some ways. Indeed, some studies have suggested that using MTurk results in less representative samples than does using some other sampling methods (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Huff & Tingley, 2015).

In addition, my sample was mostly white, which limited my ability to explore any possible racial/ethnic or cultural differences in experiences of outness across participants. A study by Villicana, Delucio, and Biernat (2016) suggested that verbal disclosure of sexual orientation played a different role in subjective well-being for gay Latino men than it did for gay White men. The authors found that gay Latino men were more likely to engage in nonverbal expressions of sexual orientation than in verbal disclosure of sexual orientation. In turn, they found that low verbal disclosure was related to lower subjective well-being for gay White men but not for gay Latino men. The results of this study suggest that race/ethnicity and cultural differences are important to how nonheterosexual individuals experience and express outness. Indeed, a few participants in this sample wrote about how their cultural environment interacted with their outness. However, the number of participants who wrote about this was very small, perhaps because the questions in the survey did not necessarily invite participants to describe the cultural implications of outness that they have experienced. Oversampling nonwhite participants and including more specific questions about cultural experiences of outness could yield more information about how conceptualizations of outness vary across cultural identities.

Using MTurk to collect qualitative data also resulted in several problems that may be specifically related to this service. First, despite setting up the surveys so that participants could participate in only one of the four HITs and could not participate in that HIT more than once,

several people were able to skirt this setting, some taking the survey up to four times. In addition, I restricted participants to U.S. residents, but again, some participants nevertheless participated from several places around the world. Both of the aforementioned problems resulted in the need to delete several participants. Finally, the speed with which MTurk participants respond to HITs restricted the sample to participants who responded during a certain time of day. In my case, much of the data from nonheterosexual participants was collected overnight. It is difficult to say definitively whether participants who responded in the evening or the middle of the night are qualitatively different from those who might have responded in the morning or midafternoon, but it is certainly possible. Future studies would benefit from ensuring that HITs are available at all times of day to eliminate this possibility.

It would be useful to qualitatively explore nonheterosexual individuals' ideas about how outness as they conceptualize it has influenced their well-being. Several participants alluded to experiencing greater levels of happiness as a result of increased outness or feelings of shame as a result of not being out, but some studies have also suggested that increased outness is not always related to increased well-being (e.g., Aranda et al., 2015; Feldman & Wright, 2013; Legate et al., 2012; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009). Exploring participants' beliefs about how their experiences of outness affect their well-being could provide valuable insight into the circumstances in which increased outness might be risky or protective.

It would also be useful to explore outness as it relates to gender identity. My sample did not include any transgender, gender fluid, or genderqueer participants, perhaps because our HIT titles utilized language indicating the typically cisgender male/female binary. Past research has suggested that outness presents some different issues for those with minority gender identities than it does for those with minority sexual orientation identities (Zimman, 2009). Further, it is

likely that some individuals with minority gender identities also have minority sexual orientation identities. Exploring the experiences of those navigating outness in multiple domains will likely illuminate the variety of ways in which outness is conceptualized for different individuals.

It might also be useful to work toward creating an outness measure that better reflects the experiences of those who complete it. Researchers often work to measure constructs with the goal of identifying meaningful relationships among them, and there certainly could be a place for outness in this endeavor. Some of the more promising suggestions participants made that might be feasibly implemented in future outness measures are the inclusion of a weighting system for different social groups and the explicit inclusion of nonverbal methods for disclosing sexual orientation. Although participants emphasized the multifaceted and personal nature of outness, it may still be useful to develop a measure that approximates participants' experiences more closely than do measures that are available currently.

Conclusions

Nonheterosexual individuals in this study conceptualized outness about sexual orientation in many different ways. Sometimes, the Outness Inventory and the Nebraska Outness Scale aligned well with these conceptualizations, and sometimes the scales were unable to capture important elements of these conceptualizations. Participants suggested some potentially feasible updates to existing outness measures, but it is difficult to say whether these updates would significantly improve utility in addition to increasing the scales' complexity. Researchers should continue to consider the value of attempting to measure outness, and clinicians treating clients who are struggling with issues related to outness about sexual orientation would benefit from taking care not to perpetuate the problematic assumption that outness is causally related to mental, physical, and relationship health concerns.

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Appendix A

Information Statement

The Department of Psychology at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

We are conducting this study to better understand the way people define outness about sexual orientation and how they feel about completing a commonly used measure of outness. This will involve filling out a survey online that consists of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It will probably take about 20 minutes, and you will be paid \$2.50 for your participation. The content of the survey should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life.

Although participation may not benefit you directly, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of how people define outness about sexual orientation and of how outness may be measured more accurately. Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. The survey will not ask for your name or any other identifying information, and we assure you that your personal information will not be associated with any publication or presentation related to the information collected about you in the completion of this survey. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or by university policy or (b) you give written permission. It is possible, however, with Internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response. Be aware that because no identifying information will be attached to your responses, we will be unable to discard your responses upon request.

The data collected in this study will be used by graduate student Kate Esterline, Professor Charlene Muehlenhard, and Professor Muehlenhard's students to better understand people's experiences of outness about sexual orientation. By agreeing at the bottom of this page, you give permission for the use of the information gathered in this study at any time in the future.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact us by phone or email.

Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email irb@ku.edu.

Sincerely,

Kate Esterline, M.A.
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Appendix B

Debriefing Information

The questionnaire asked about how “out” you consider yourself. It also asked you to complete two measures of outness (the Outness Inventory and the Nebraska Outness Scale) and to report on your experience with completing those measures. The purpose of this study is to explore how different individuals think about and define outness and whether the measures used in this study accurately reflect individuals’ understandings of their own outness. Many studies have investigated how outness may be related to health variables such as mental health, physical health, and relationship quality/satisfaction. These past studies have raised several questions, such as:

- Do researchers’ definitions of outness and participants’ definitions of outness match?
- Do participants have trouble answering certain questions about their outness level?
- Is it possible to determine how “out” someone is with just one number?
- Do researchers repeatedly overlook any important aspects of outness that should be considered?
- Etc.

It is possible that problems exist within measures, like the Outness Inventory or the Nebraska Outness Scale, that are widely used by researchers who hope to find relationships between outness and health variables. We hope to determine whether participants believe these measures accurately assess their outness level as they understand it and whether they believe the measures could be improved. Because the study is partially qualitative, asking open-ended questions, the possible findings are limitless.

Many studies on this topic have been quantitative, providing information about how out participants are based on their answers to a questionnaire or comparing outness with health variables, such as mental health, physical health, or relationship quality/satisfaction. In contrast, the current study is mostly qualitative, investigating people’s experiences in their own words. We are asking respondents for their own thoughts and impressions about their experiences with outness and completing the Outness Inventory and the Nebraska Outness Scale.

Please note that the scores you obtained on the Outness Inventory and the Nebraska Outness Scale do not necessarily represent a “true” description of your outness. As we mentioned above, it is possible that these measures are problematic, and you may have even found them difficult to complete. We asked you to complete these measures so that we could gather information about how well these measures capture your own ideas about outness, not to determine how out you “really are.”

We will analyze the data we collect from this questionnaire with the intent of locating themes that may be present in peoples’ responses. Themes could be ways in which people define outness, difficulties participants had with answering questions in the two outness measures, or suggestions for improving the two outness measures. The themes we find will contribute to a greater understanding of how people experience answering questions about their own outness level and how we might more accurately measure outness.

Thank you for your participation in this study!

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the graduate student conducting this study or the faculty advisor:

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If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the HRPP: Human Research Protection Program; University of Kansas; 2385 Irving Hill Road; Lawrence, KS 66045-7568 (785) 864-7429, hscl@ku.edu

Appendix C

Demographics:

Gender:

- a) Female
- b) Male
- c) Gender Variant _____
- d) Prefer not to answer

Age:

Race/ethnicity:

- a) African American/Black
- b) Asian American/Asian
- c) European American/White
- d) Hispanic American/Latino/Latina
- e) Native American/American Indian
- f) Biracial/Multiracial
- h) None of these
- i) Prefer not to answer

In your own words, what is your sexual orientation?

Which of the following, if any, best reflects your sexual orientation?

- a) Lesbian/gay woman
- b) Gay man
- c) Heterosexual/straight
- d) Bisexual
- e) Pansexual
- f) Queer
- g) Fluid
- h) Asexual
- i) Other (please specify) _____
- j) Prefer not to answer

Has your sexual behavior been (check one):

- a) Only with females
- b) Mostly with females
- c) Equally with females and males
- d) Mostly with males
- e) Only with males
- f) Not applicable/no sexual experience
- g) Other _____
- h) Prefer not to answer

Have your romantic relationships been (check one):

- a) a) Only with females
- b) b) Mostly with females
- c) c) Equally with females and males
- d) d) Mostly with males
- e) e) Only with males
- f) f) Not applicable/no romantic experience
- g) g) Other _____
- h) h) Prefer not to answer

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This questionnaire is about being “out” about one’s sexual orientation.

Do you consider yourself to be out about your sexual orientation?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ other _____

Please explain your answer to the previous question. Why did you answer the way you did about whether you consider yourself to be out about your sexual orientation? Use as much detail as you would like.

What is *YOUR* definition of being out?

In the sliding scale below, move the marker to show how out you consider yourself to be:

0 ___ 10 ___ 20 ___ 30 ___ 40 ___ 50 ___ 60 ___ 70 ___ 80 ___ 90 ___ 100 (slider)

Please explain why you chose (answer piped from previous question).

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Please respond to the following measures to the best of your ability, even if you have never considered how out you are about your sexual orientation before.

The following items are part of a survey called the Outness Inventory.

Use the following rating scale to indicate how open you are about your sexual orientation to the people listed below. Try to respond to all of the items, but leave items blank if they do not apply to you. If an item refers to a group of people (e.g., work peers), then indicate how out you generally are to that group.

1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status

2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about
 3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about
 4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about
 5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about
 6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is sometimes talked about
 7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about
 0 = not applicable to your situation; there is no such person or group of people in your life

1. mother	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
2. father	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
3. siblings (sisters, brothers)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
4. extended family/relatives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
5. my <u>new</u> straight friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
6. my work peers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
7. my work supervisor(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
8. members of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
9. leaders of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
10. strangers, new acquaintances	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0
11. my <u>old</u> heterosexual friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0

Please provide feedback about your experience completing this scale.

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The following items are part of a survey called the Nebraska Outness Scale.

What percent of the people in this group do you think are aware of your sexual orientation (meaning they are aware of whether you consider yourself straight, gay, etc.)?

Members of your immediate family (e.g., parents and siblings)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Members of your extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
People you socialize with (e.g., friends and acquaintances)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
People at your work/school (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Strangers (e.g., someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

How often do you avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating your sexual orientation (e.g., not talking about your significant other, changing your mannerisms) when interacting with members of these groups?

	Never				Half the time					Always
Members of your immediate family (e.g., parents and siblings)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Members of your extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
People you socialize with (e.g., friends and acquaintances)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
People at your work/school (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Strangers (e.g., someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Please provide feedback about your experience completing this scale.

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On the Outness Inventory, scores can range from 0 to 100, where 0 = *not at all out* and 100 = *completely out*.

Your score was _____ (calculated via Qualtrics)

Do you think that that number accurately reflects your level of outness? Why or why not?

On the Nebraska Outness Scale, scores can range from 0 to 100, where 0 = *not at all out* and 100 = *completely out*.

Your score was _____ (calculated via Qualtrics)

Do you think that that number accurately reflects your level of outness? Why or why not?

Earlier in the survey, you rated your outness as _____ (piped) out of 100. If there are differences or similarities among your three outness scores, what do you think accounts for those differences or similarities?

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In general, what would a good measure of outness about sexual orientation status need to take into account?

In general, do you think that someone's outness about their sexual orientation status can be measured accurately? Why or why not?

Outness Inventory

1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status

2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about

3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about

4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about

5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about

6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is sometimes talked about

7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about

0 = not applicable to your situation; there is no such person or group of people in your life

[illegible]

Nebraska Outness Scale

Nebraska Outness Scale

What percent of the people in this group do you think are aware of your sexual orientation (meaning they are aware of whether you consider yourself straight, gay, etc.)?

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Members of your immediate family (e.g., parents and siblings)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Members of your extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People you socialize with (e.g., friends and acquaintances)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People at your work/school (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strangers (e.g., someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How often do you avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating your sexual orientation (e.g., not talking about your significant other, changing your mannerisms) when interacting with members of these groups?

	Never	Half of the Time	Always
Members of your immediate family (e.g., parents and siblings)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Members of your extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People you socialize with (e.g., friends and acquaintances)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People at your work/school (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strangers (e.g., someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix E

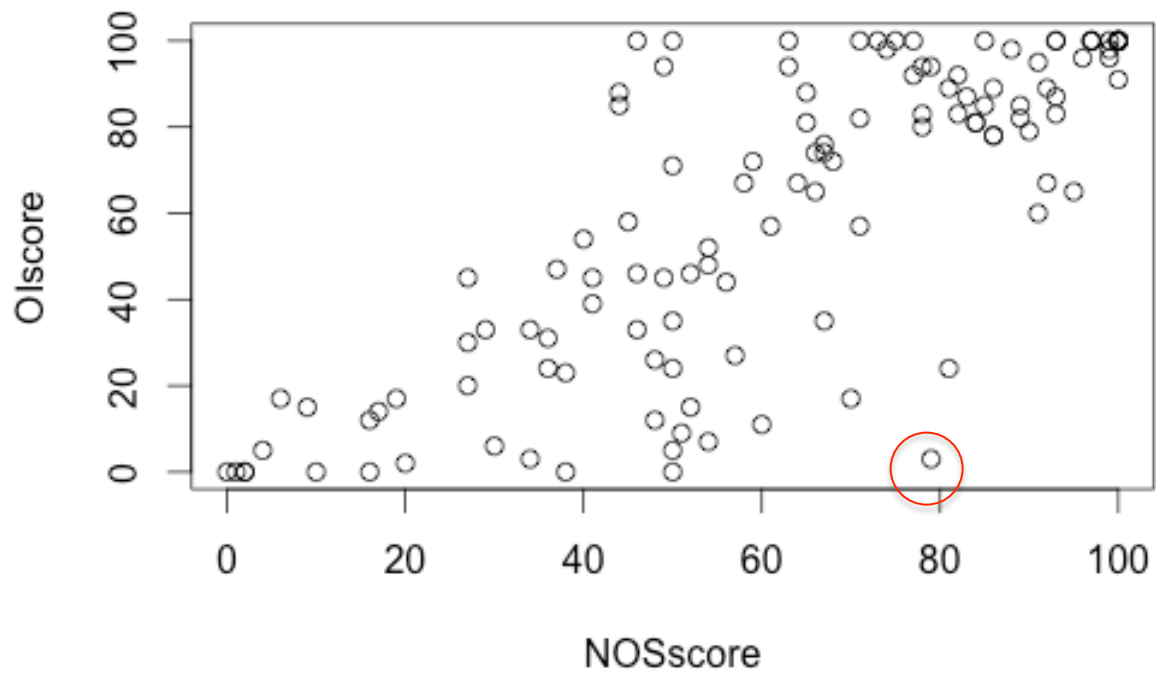


Figure 7a. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

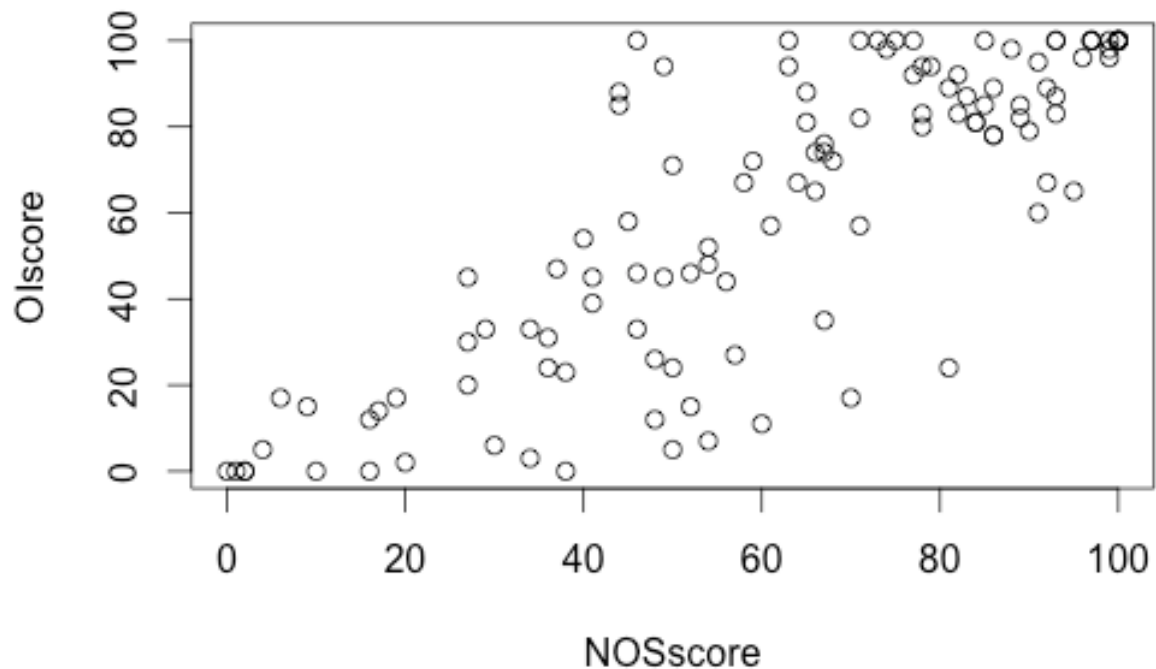


Figure 7b. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

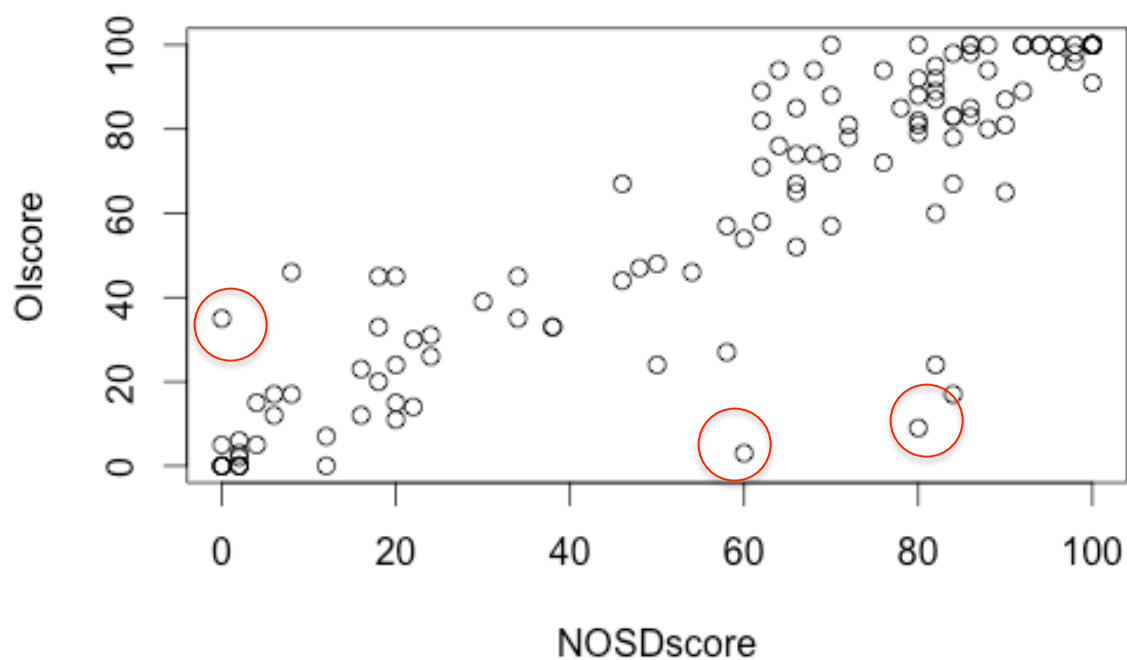


Figure 8a. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale – Disclosure subscale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

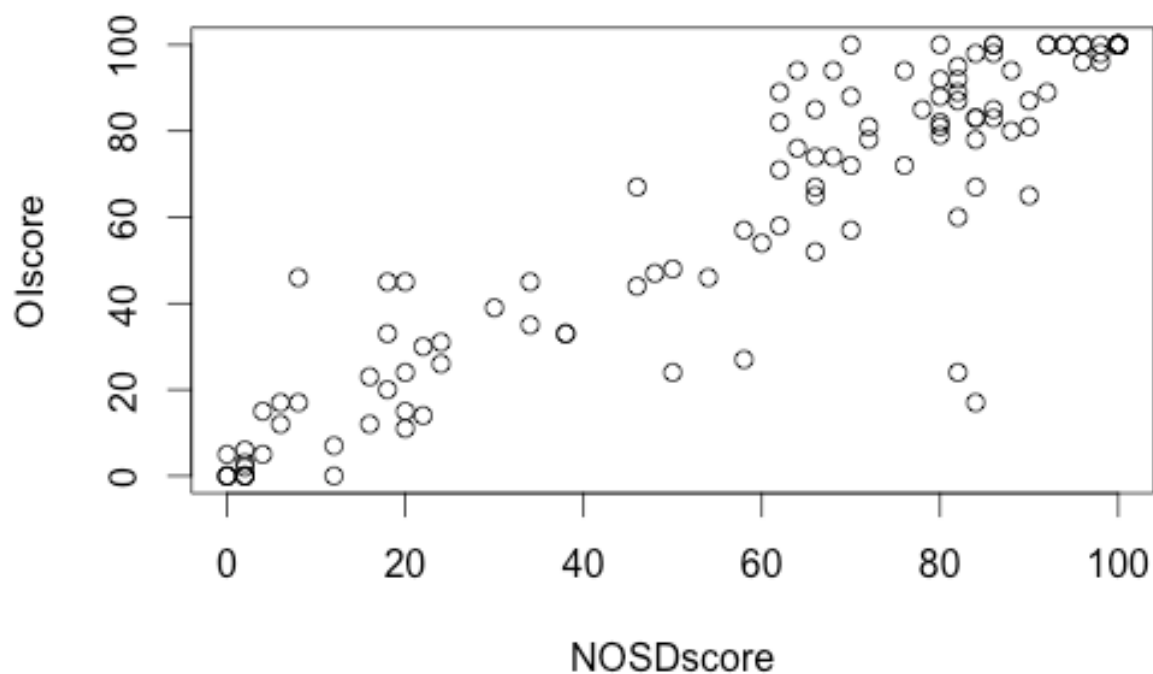


Figure 8b. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale – Disclosure subscale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.

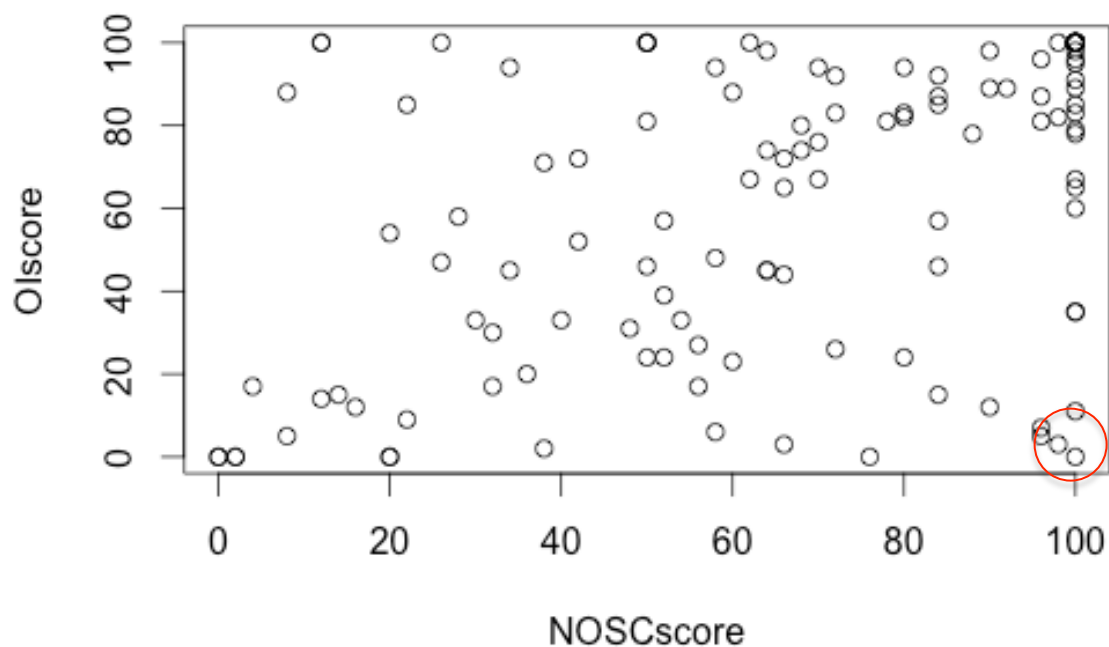


Figure 9a. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale – Concealment subscale scores for all nonheterosexual participants. Outliers who misread a scale are circled in red.

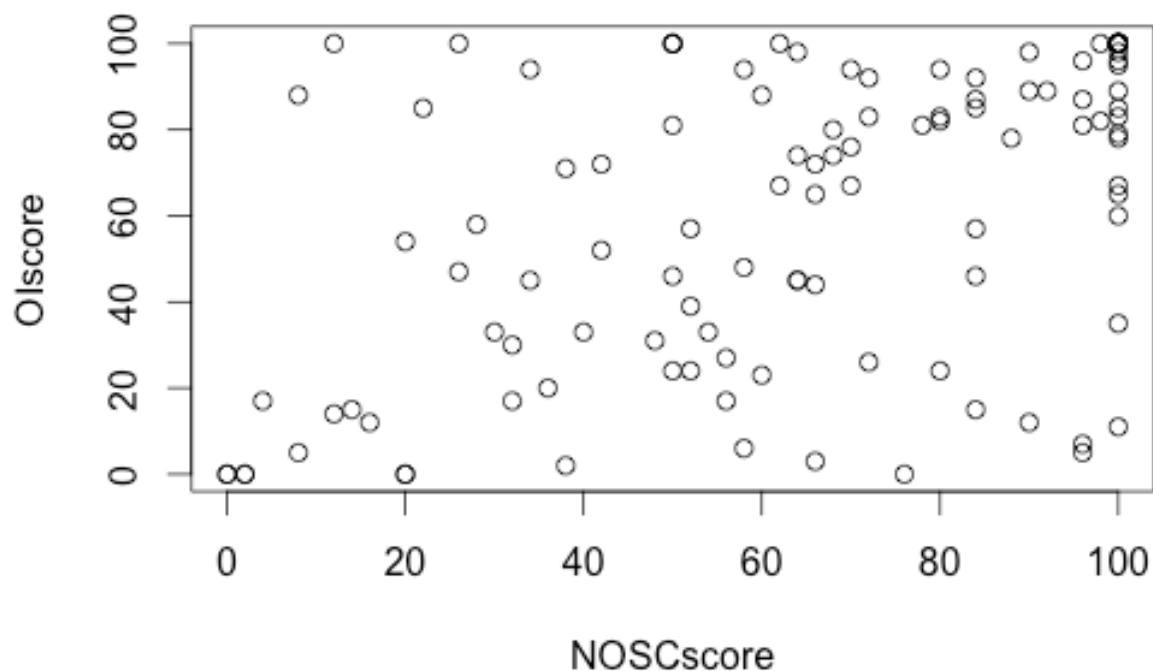


Figure 9b. Scatter plot of Outness Inventory and Nebraska Outness Scale – Concealment subscale scores with participants who misread a scale removed.